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IN OUR HOURS OF EASE.

BY FRANKFORT MOORE,

Author of "Phyllis of Philistia," "They call it Love," &c.



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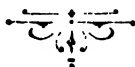
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HER TENDER HEART.

HER TENDER HEART.



ADEMOISELLE GABRIELLA SPERANZA was accused of being good-natured, and it is to be feared that the accusation was substantiated by facts which came under the notice of more than one

member of the Imperial Opera Company, among whose *prime donne* the Speranza occupied high rank. She had, for instance, only laughed when Signor Boccione had spoilt the effect of her *romanza* in *Francesca da Rimini* by going through some buffo "business" among the crowd at the back of the stage; and she had merely given a shrug when Madame Frappi had shrieked her down in the lovely duetto in the same opera,

which every one knows should be taken *pianissimo*. She had not held out with the impresario for an "and" to precede her name in the bills, though it is understood that this is a privilege which no self-respecting *artiste* will forego; and, finally, there was good room to suspect that she was in the habit of making over her night's bouquets to Giuseppe, the general factotum of the company, without receiving any equivalent from him. Now, as the sale of the bouquets to the florists, from whom they were originally purchased, forms by no means an inconsiderable contribution to the legitimate earnings of a prima donna, it seems impossible to deny that Mademoiselle Speranza had a tender heart.

Now and again a whisper of what her sister *artistes* were saying about her reached her ears, and though, of course, she was at first naturally very angry, yet, on the whole, it was admitted that she bore the brand of good-nature with equanimity. She did not allow the accusation to embitter her existence. She thought it well, however, to make Giuseppe understand that he must give her an account of the signed portraits of herself which he was in the habit of selling outside the opera house. Her determined attitude in respect of this point should, she felt, neutralise the malicious suggestions that had been made from time to time regarding her good nature. Giuseppe assured her with all the

vehemence of which the Italian tongue is capable, and by the aid of some reminiscences of paganism, such as the body of Bacchus, that no month should pass without his placing before her a full account of her photographs, plain and coloured, so that she should get every penny of profit made by the sales, with the exception of whatever trifling honorarium she might see fit to bestow upon the *porero diavolo* whose object in living was to serve Mademoiselle Speranza ; and mademoiselle was satisfied.

(The fact that she was so easily satisfied was set down by her calumniators as further evidence of that good-nature which was laid to her charge.)

It was, however, Madame Célestine, the Speranza's companion, who had the best opportunity of becoming acquainted with the nature of the prima donna, and she thought it her duty to affirm, with great earnestness of gesture, that the *diva* was quite as hard as any other member of the Imperial Opera, and that in the matter of dress it was questionable if any lady in the company was half so exacting, though mademoiselle, being an Englishwoman, was not accredited with any particular fastidiousness in this respect. Of course Madame Célestine knew in her heart of hearts that Mademoiselle Speranza had always been kindness itself to every one with whom she came in contact, but she thought it right to

repudiate most emphatically the charge which was brought against her by the irresponsible members of the company. She knew that to call a woman good-natured is nearly as bad as to call a woman sensible ; either qualification assumes that she is devoid of any strong personality ; and so she endeavoured, but with very indifferent success, to make people around her believe that the Speranza did not differ materially from her sister *artistes* so far as her temper and temperament were concerned. But many were the remonstrances which the middle-aged and experienced, if diminutive, Frenchwoman, offered to the handsome English soprano who was known to all the world as Mademoiselle Speranza, in regard to her careless benefactions—her indiscriminate charities.

“What does it matter, my Célestine ?” the lady was accustomed to cry, with a certain lifting of the shoulders that more than suggested the deprecatory shrug of a well-bred Frenchwoman—she was so admirable an *artiste* that, although English, she could very nearly reproduce the true shrug in all its expressive phases ; the shrug that may be translated *N'importe* ; the shrug that means *Tant pis pour lui* ; the shrug that suggests *la dernière parole*. “What does it matter, my Célestine ? I earn ten times as much money as I can spend even with your kind assistance, for you have no expensive tastes, and

I inherited my diamonds. What does it matter if I throw away a franc or two upon the undeserving? Alas! that Providence should have decreed that only the undeserving in this world put forward their claims—that the deserving ones of the earth remain silent!”

Then Madame Célestine invariably took refuge in the shrug—the true shrug, not the imitation—to express the exact shade of her meaning, and her friend came thereby to understand quite easily that it was her opinion that if mademoiselle was desirous of being regarded in every direction as a fool, it was no particular business of her companion's to endeavour to interfere with her wishes. Yes, Madame Célestine's shrug was tolerably expressive, and it usually brought the conversation to a close.

It was quite a different sort of gesture that Madame Célestine gave when one morning, as she and Mademoiselle Speranza were sitting together in the breakfast-room of the flat which they occupied, the latter handed her a letter which she had just read with several others that had arrived by the morning delivery.

“What do you make of that?” the prima donna inquired.

Madame Célestine glanced through her pince-nez first at the envelope, then at the letter which had been enclosed in it. It was written in English, and in a bold free hand:—

"MADAM,—I am extremely anxious to have an interview with you with regard to a matter which, though trifling in itself, is a question of life and death to me. A very few minutes will be sufficient for me, and having heard of your kindness of heart, I venture to hope that my presumption in venturing to call on you shortly after noon to-morrow will not be rebuked by your declining to see me for a moment? As, however, I do not wish to obtain this favour from you on false pretences, I think it only honourable to let you know at once that, though the business is vital so far as I am concerned, it has no bearing upon you.

"Your father and mine were comrades in the old Bayonetteers. You may have heard my name mentioned in connection with a great disgrace. But I have hidden that name for ever, and am compelled to sign myself,

"Madam,

"Yours not without hope,

"REGINALD OVERTON.

"What do you make of that?" asked Gabriella, when she perceived that the companion had read the letter.

"He has heard of your kindness of heart—he says it. Yes—there!" said the companion.

"And you think that he is one of the customary writers of begging letters?" said Gabriella.

"What else can he be?" said Madame Célestine.

"He can be—well, otherwise."

"P'chut! a lover—*prétendu*—one of the fools who fling bouquets—I call them impostors. You will not see this *mauvais sujet*!"

"Why should I not see him—*mauvais sujet* or not? I do not object to grant interviews to men of the *caurien* type. They never insult one. It is only the millionaire who is to be dreaded. Yes, I think I'll see this man. He says his father and mine were old comrades."

"One can easily say that. Every one knows that the Speranza of the Imperial Opera is Gabriella Hope, the daughter of General Hope, late of the English army. But see the man if you please. I shall be here."

"Of course you will be here."

"It is now close upon noon"—they had breakfasted at eleven—"and the one virtue which such men retain is punctuality; you never knew the writer of a begging letter to come five minutes after the hour he appoints for an interview."

Madame Célestine hastened out of the room to complete her toilette; even if the man was an impostor, there was no reason why he should not be capable of appreciating the *nuances* of a graceful morning toilette in association with a lady who was only a few years over forty.

She had scarcely returned to the room when the expected visitor was admitted. He was a tall and well-made man of apparently a year or two over thirty. His face was bronzed, and his long moustache was of that docile order which suggests the most careful early training. The frock coat that he wore was pitifully shabby, and the least practised eye could see that the attempt which had recently been made to ink the seams was, though well meant, absolutely futile. His boots, too, were far from being in perfect order, though all that blacking could do for them had certainly been done.

The bow that he made to the two ladies was that of a well-bred man.

"You are Mr. Overton?" said Gabriella.

"That is the name I think fit to call myself," he replied after a little pause. His accent was that of a man accustomed to good society.

"You wish to have this interview with me? I should tell you that my friend, Madame Célestine, understands English perfectly."

"I have no right to ask for a private interview—I have no right to ask for any form of interview whatever. It is only through your extraordinary kindness that I am here."

"I fear I must ask you to proceed at once to the object of your visit."

He had made a pause after speaking, as if he expected her to question him still further.

"Mademoiselle Speranza," said he at once, "I have no right to come to you. I was once a captain of Dragoons. I am now a—a—I cannot say the word—a lay figure on the stage of the Imperial Opera House. I will say the word—a super—that is what they call us."

"There is nothing dishonourable in acting in that capacity. You are as necessary to the correct production of the lyric drama as the *prima donna assoluta*."

"Ah! that is the thought which keeps me alive. I have heard you sing——"

Madame Célestine looked at her watch ostentatiously.

"Pardon me," she said, "but in ten minutes the carriage will be at the door, mademoiselle."

"I fear I must ask you to proceed directly to the object of your visit," said Gabriella, though not quite so chillingly as she had spoken previously to the same effect.

The man looked down at his boots for some moments.

"I can scarcely tell you why I have come here—it is too ridiculous, too absurd for words. Were I to tell you, you would have the right to laugh at me and point to the door. I think I had better go at once."

"I think that it is extremely unlikely that I shall laugh at you," said the *prima donna*.

“ You are unfortunate. Your father and mine were comrades.”

“ I don't wish to make that an excuse for coming here to-day,” he cried at once. “ I cannot—yes, I will tell you all and then you can send me away. I shall have deserved it. Mademoiselle Speranza, the pittance which I receive from the manager of the opera is all that stands between me and starvation, and now I am threatened with dismissal.

“ And you wish me to speak in your favour to Sir Sigismond ?”

“ No, no, no ; nothing of the kind, I assure you. I know that any move of yours in that direction would be fatal to me. I know Sir Sigismond and his stage manager. So do you.”

“ Yes ; I know them both. I know that what you say is quite true. But why should they dismiss you ?”

“ Sir Sigismond knows nothing ; they do not worry him about the shortcomings of miserable supers. Unfortunately I was not meant to be a super either by birth or training. Those poor wretches among whom I stand nightly are admirably fitted for the duties of their situation. They are mere machines. They hear nothing of the music that thrills me—that intoxicates me—that blinds me for the night. They remain stolid while I—I make a fool of myself. The

first time the attention of the stage manager was called to my deficiencies——”

“Deficiencies?”

“Yes, from his point of view—the only one to be considered—the first time, I say, was when, by a remarkable coincidence, I found myself on the stage with one of my old chargers—he was ridden by Signor Boccione in *Flavio*, and unfortunately he recognised me at once, and ruined the best scene in the opera by neighing as he made his way towards me—somewhat uncereemoniously, I’m afraid; but poor old Pat was like his master—trained in a different school from that which turns out stage machines.”

“You explained that the horse had once been your charger?” said Gabriella.

“I explained,” he replied in a soft, resigned tone. “Yes, but the explanation only caused me to be insulted. They sneered at me—‘I should buy the old horse, since he was so attached to me,’ they said; ‘buy him, and ride him in the Park.’”

“The wretches! They have no feeling!” cried the prima donna. “I think the incident is one of the most pathetic I have ever heard.”

“It is undoubtedly pathetic,” remarked Madame Célestine. “But what can you do, my dear mademoiselle?”

“I did not mean to tell you about the horse,” said he. “Only that incident was the beginning

of my trouble at the theatre. They did not dismiss me at that time ; they only cautioned me. Now I have been cautioned again."

"But *Flavio* was withdrawn a fortnight ago."

"Yes ; but you know what a *furor* your appearance in *La Sorella* has produced."

"What of that ? There is no horse in that opera."

"I will tell you all, mademoiselle, and then you may laugh at me if you please. Your singing of that aria 'Dove sei, fratello?' upset me. Great heavens ! who could remain passive when glorious notes were in the air ? I was not the man. I was thrilled with your singing of the lovely music, and—I don't blush to confess it—I wept through the entire scena. I wept, and I know that I shall do it again—I was one of the cruel guards of Armina when she is dragged off to prison. The stage manager saw my tears and swore at me. I feel that I shall be equally moved every time you sing it, and then—then——"

"The stage manager is a wretch—an inhuman——"

"No—no—pardon me ! he is only doing his duty. A super should have no feelings."

"I will resign the part if they dismiss you—yes, I'll write this very instant !"

"For Heaven's sake—no—no—a thousand

times no. I am a man—at any rate as much of a man as a wretched lay figure dare be. What would be my feelings, do you think, if I were accountable for your withdrawal from a part that you have created as no living soprano could create it? I only ask—but I have no right to ask anything; you have been too good—too sympathetic already.”

“You say that you ask——”

“It is folly. It occurred to me, Mademoiselle Speranza, that you might possibly see your way to—to——”

Madame Célestine smiled as the man hesitated. She felt that he was at the point of making a demand for money.

“I’m ashamed to suggest it,” resumed the visitor; “but if you could see your way to—to—well, to put less of your soul into that aria—to give me a chance—why, even if you were to sing it no better than Madame Frappi would sing it, you would still create a *furor*, but then I should be saved.”

“Sir,” cried Madame Célestine, “your suggestion is ridiculous—absurd—impossible!”

“It is—it is,” said he, turning away. “Yes, I knew that it was absurd. Pray forgive me, mademoiselle. I’ll manage to pull along pretty well. After all, there’s the river.”

“Don’t go,” said Gabriella. He had taken a step or two towards the door. “What you have

told me has affected me deeply. What are all the plaudits of a crowd compared to the spontaneous tribute of one sympathetic heart ! I hope you will allow me to make some compensation to you—I feel that I am responsible for your unfortunate relations in regard to the stage manager, and if money——”

“Mademoiselle Speranza,” said the man, gravely, “I thank you for your kindness in listening to me. Allow me to wish you good morning.”

“Stay,” cried Gabriella, rising. “I ask your pardon. I forgot for the moment. But if you are dismissed come to me. I have a great deal of work to be done—copying out parts—you could surely copy a little music.”

“I perceive your kindness of heart,” said he, sadly. “But it would be impossible for me to touch a sixpence of your money. The one way you could help me is, I perceive, impossible. Mademoiselle, I have exceeded my ten minutes. I will try and restrain myself to-night. *La Sorella* is the opera to-night. Good morning.”

He was gone before the *diva* could speak another word.

“He is as proud as Lucifer !” said Madame Célestine.

“He is an English gentleman !” said Gabrielle. “If he is sent starving from the theatre,

I shall be responsible in the sight of Heaven for his misfortune."

"That is quite nonsense, my dear," said her companion.

And so it was.

The opera of *La Sorella* was produced at the Imperial Theatre that night, and the Speranza reappeared in the part of the lovely heroine. Every scene went as admirably as before; but when it came to the singing of that entrancing aria "Dove sei, fratello?" it seemed as if the prima donna, instead of reserving herself for the final effort, had overtaxed her voice in the early scenes, for she delivered the music quite mechanically and with an entire absence of soul. The impresario was astonished, and so also was the conductor. They were not astonished, however, when they found that the aria had fallen quite flat upon the audience. Upon the occasion of the first performance of the opera this aria had been re-demanded five times, and it was universally admitted that the Speranza's singing of it had plucked the opera out of the fire—that was the very phrase made use of by Sir Sigismond in referring to it. It was while the applause was still ringing through the house he had offered the composer a considerable sum for the work; so that now he looked more than a trifle glum as the guards on the stage seized the distracted sister and forced her into the canvas

prison at the O. P. side, without any demonstration on the part of the audience.

"She wants staying power, does the Speranza," his confidential adviser remarked to him at the close of the act.

"She'll have to find it if she is to stay in my company," said he.

But when he met her in one of the passages he only said—

"You weren't quite up to the mark to-night, mademoiselle. I hope you're looking after yourself."

"Oh, yes," she said, "I'm looking after myself. I'm only dead tired. Good-night."

The next morning she received a letter signed "Reginald Overton," overflowing with thanks. She had saved him, the writer declared. He had been able to master his emotions. He had not shed a tear.

She had no trouble in believing him.

After the lapse of four days *La Sorella* was performed again. Sir Sigismond and the composer watched with considerable trepidation the appearance of Mademoiselle Speranza. They had no room to complain of the way she sang and acted until the supreme moment came when the splendid aria should have thrilled the house. Up to this point she had been magnificent, but once more she failed to impart any soul to the aria, and the composer and the impresario had a duet

together, taken *fortissimo* throughout, in the room of the latter.

"What is to be done?" cried the composer. "That woman, who, I thought, was at the point of making the fortune of both of us, has made fools of us."

"I'll send to the Frappi to get up the part to-morrow," said Sir Sigismond. "May be when the Speranza hears that she'll come to her senses."

The next morning Gabriella had brought her two letters. One was from the impresario, and it conveyed to her the intelligence that the composer feared that the opera made too great demands upon her upper register in the earlier scenes to admit of her doing justice to the great aria in the last, so that all that was left for the management to do was to transfer the part to Madame Frappi. This course they adopted with the greatest regret.

The other letter was from Reginald Overton. It was overflowing with gratitude. He had not, he said, been in the least degree moved by her singing of the pathetic aria, and he considered himself firmly established in his situation at the theatre.

The indignation of Madame Célestine was unbounded.

"You must be told that you have made yourself a fool," she cried. "You have never

believed what every one has seen all long—that that Frappi woman has been jealous to a point of madness at your success, and that she has only been waiting for such a *contretemps* as you have brought about by your quixotic conduct to step into your place. It will be all over the town to-morrow—over Europe a week hence—that the Frappi has triumphed where the Speranza has failed.”

“I have saved a man’s life,” said Gabriella, quietly.

“Oh !”

“Madame Célestine flounced to the door. She almost walked into the arms of a gentleman who was being shown in—a gentleman wearing a well-built frock coat and patent leather shoes—a gentleman whose left eye was slightly discoloured.

“That is the wretch who is accountable for all !” cried Madame Célestine, pointing an indignant forefinger at the gentleman, whose features were those of Reginald Overton, but whose apparel was that of a gentleman who does not shrink from Piccadilly in the height of the season.

“My dear mademoiselle, your friend has spoken the truth,” he cried. “I am a wretch—an impostor. I am not a super, and I never was one. I wish to heaven that I was one rather than the husband of that tigress. But I’ve done

with her for ever. Look at that eye. That was her jealousy last night. But I've done with her for ever. Oh, what a fool I was to marry her !”

“To whom do you refer, sir ?” asked Gabriella.

“To whom ? Why, to that creature who calls herself Frappi, to be sure. It was I who was infamous enough to yield to her entreaties, and to lend myself to her plot to enable her to step into your shoes. To step into your shoes ! She's not fit to blacken them, though she's good at blacking things—eyes for instance ; but I'm quit of her for ever. How can I ever ask you to forgive me ? She urged me on—that fiend !—I came to you with the story—your good-nature—but I'm quit of her——”

“And now we wish to be quit of you, sir !” shrieked Madame Célestine, throwing open the door.

“Mademoiselle Speranza, you are an angel—an angel !” cried the man. “You are as much an angel as she—my wife—is a demon. But I'm quit—— God bless you.”

* * * *

Madame Célestine had a brief interview with Sir Sigismond before noon that day. The opera of *La Sorella* was performed on the following evening, and even Sir Sigismond, who has been rendered somewhat callous as regards pathos,

through a long experience of the exponents of pathetic operatic numbers, was observed to wipe his eyes after the Speranza's sixth recall for her glorious rendering of "Dove sei, fratello?"

But then he knew that he had got the better of the composer in bargaining for the right of the opera.

REGGIE'S RIVAL.

REGGIE'S RIVAL.

ROSAMUND has greatly disappointed me ; she has joined a ladies' club—they call themselves The Scribblers, and it seems they have rooms of their own and a House Tea, if you please. Oh, yes, Rosamund has greatly disappointed me. I used to think her a woman of sense, Freddy."

"Though she did marry your younger brother instead of yourself, Reggie," said Freddy.

Reggie gave a laugh—a kind of laugh—as he examined the end of his cigar preparatory to placing it in the little guillotine which hung at the end of his watch chain.

"Yes, she didn't marry me," he said in a very contemplative tone (for him). "I sometimes think that's why I think so highly of her."

"Or did think so highly of her," remarked Freddy. "You can't think highly of a woman

who belongs to a ladies' club—that would be out of the question. But I believe the House Tea or The Scribblers is one of the most impressive things to be seen in London, or, in fact, in any part of the world. It ranks second to the Pontifical High Mass at St. Peter's, or a procession of the unemployed against the House of Lords."

"I daresay. I've had no experience of The Scribblers, or the Pontifi, or the Unemployed. I've my own ideas about them all, however."

"Yes, I've no doubt that you think them all a pack of humbugs. Hampshire is desperately intolerant of humbugs ; and it's apt to think that the world is divided into Hampshire and humbug."

"I'm distinctly disappointed in Rosamund—good Lord ! The Scribblers !"

"You should attend one of their Wednesday House Teas. I've heard of them. They've a notice in the dining-room—they call it the dining-room, though no square meal has ever been served in it up to the present—a notice that 'The Committee beg to announce that in response to what they believe to be a practically universal desire of the Club, a House Tea will be served every Wednesday evening at 6 p.m. After due consideration the Committee have decided to fix the price at sixpence each. Members are entitled to invite guests to the House Tea, the names to be submitted to the Committee at least a fortnight in advance. The

Committee reserve to themselves the right under exceptional circumstances to limit to nine the number of names submitted by any one member."

"You seem to know all about it."

"But I don't. Only those who have survived a House Tea know all about it; and I never was at one. I believe you can have a slice of tongue or an egg—poached or boiled—with your tea; no extra charge for salt or pepper—some Scribblers are mammoths for pepper, I understand. They work off its effects in their articles on the great Equalisation of Mates question."

"The Equalisation of Mates question? I never heard of it."

"Why, what's Hampshire thinking about anyway if it isn't in the race on the Equalisation of Mates question? Nothing else is being talked of here this season. Equalisation of Mates—making the sauce for the goose apply to the gander in all matters of daily life, from love to latch keys, inclusive."

"I believe that I now and again saw something about that rubbish in the papers. But I make it a point whenever I come across an article with the word 'movement' in it to skip it. And to think that Rosamund should have fallen so low as that."

"As what?"

"As to be a member of a Club where such things are discussed."

"Take my advice, Reggie, old man ; get back to Hampshire at the earliest possible moment ; this wicked town is no place for respectable people of your class. Meantime dine here with me and we'll go to the Parthenon afterwards ; you can't go home without seeing the new play, "The Sale of a Soul.'"

"Does it contain a lesson?" asked Reggie Upmore. "If it contains a lesson or a problem, I'll not see it. I find that the books and the plays that teach no moral are becoming rarer every day."

"Bless my soul. Every critic is purple with indignation at the small amount of morals that goes to make up both books and plays now-a-days," said Freddy.

"What do critics know about it?" said Reggie Upmore, of Little Winthorpe, Hants. "I don't know much about the business myself, but I have seen enough to show me that your books and your plays of the latest and most highly approved pattern are meant to embody a moral, though they themselves have no morals worth speaking of."

"Which is a hard saying," laughed Freddy. "A hard enough saying to have come from the most recent of play writers or novel writers. Well, you won't come to the Parthenon?"

"If I want a lesson, I'll go to my parson for

it and get it in a straightforward way with the stamp of orthodoxy on it."

"English orthodoxy—not 'made in Bohemia.' My dear old man, if a chap learned lessons only in school and church, there'd be a good many more ignorant Johnnies knocking about than there are at present. Well, come and see a living picture; you'll not find much of a moral there, I fancy."

"I don't mind a living picture. But I was talking about Rosamund. I say she has disappointed me."

"For the second time. She wouldn't marry you before; that was the first."

"That sort of thing doesn't rankle much, Freddy. There's nothing makes a chap so satisfied with himself as meeting in after years the woman who refused to marry him when she had the chance. Yes, I'll see a living picture or two under your guidance."

And he did.

He didn't care much about them, though he did not complain of any over-scrupulousness on the designers in insisting on pointing a moral in any of the set.

When he returned to his rooms from taking supper with Freddy Langdon at the Club where they had had their chat in the evening, on the subject of problems and a sister-in-law, he found a letter waiting for him from this same sister-in-law.

"I want you to come to take tea with me at The Scribblers to-morrow afternoon at five," Rosamund wrote." "I have three or four nice people at my table, and I want you particularly to meet Harold Hopeton, the author of 'Globules,' you know, whom you are certain to like."

"Certain to like," muttered Reggie. "Certain to like! Well, personally, I'd hardly like to go so far as to say 'certain.' It's scarcely wise to take a thing like that for granted. 'Globules.' I believe it's the most rampant of all the recent objectionable fictions. No, I wouldn't go quite so far as to say what's his name—Harold Hopeton—is the sort of man I'd be certain to like. I'll be hanged if I'll go to her Scribblers' Tea."

He went to his bed feeling that he had by making this resolution uttered an emphatic protest against the tendencies of the public who had made Harold Hopeton's "Globules" the success of a season.

Reginald Upmore was one of those fine healthy men who manage to get along in the world very well without keeping abreast of the most recent fancies in fiction or anything else with the exception, perhaps, of snaffles. He had inherited an estate in Hampshire which required a good deal of looking after. It had been allowed to go to ruin during his father's lifetime; for his father had given himself over, body and soul, to

the promulgation of an entirely new system of theology from which he expected great things. He had founded the sect of the Gideon Fleecers ; but the name was considered a rather unhappy one ; it did not tend to inspire confidence on the part of those persons who were dissatisfied with every existing form of church ; and the consequence was that his father, not having the training of a beneficed clergyman, found it impossible to combine the promulgation of the truth with the management of an estate so as to make at least the latter pay its expenses. He had died just when he had made the Gideon Fleecers a going concern, so to speak ; he had increased the membership to eight, of whom seven were his own tenants ; and the tenets of the tenants generally took the form of a conscientious objection to pay any rent. Under these circumstances it can easily be believed that, when Reggie Upmore entered upon his inheritance, he found matters in a bad way. The consciousness that the Gideon Fleecers were on a sound theological basis scarcely compensated him for the deplorable condition of the estate. He had, however, boldly faced the situation ; and was not deterred in his efforts to put matters right by the threat of the Seven Gideon Fleecers to renounce the system which his father had founded, if they were asked to pay that form of imposition known as rent. In the course of five years the Gideon Fleecers

as a theological sect had been blotted out of existence in Hampshire, but the restoration of rent-paying on the estate of the founder, Reginald Upmore accepted cheerfully as a compensating incident. He was not only able to pay his way, and to lodge some money in the bank, but also to hand over to his younger brother, who sometime before had married Rosamund Church, the full amount of the bequest which their amiable but abstracted father had made to him out of the fulness of his heart but the emptiness of his purse.

Of course, Rosamund and her husband, who lived in London, and were abreast of every new movement in literature and its opponent, the English drama, looked on Reggie as the best fellow in the world ; but they could not altogether perceive how it was quite impossible for him to look after his property and at the same time keep in touch with every new movement which agitated the heart of a small coterie in London. They should have had more consideration for his position ; for it kept both Rosamund and her husband extremely busy following the sinuous course of every movement, and they did nothing else.

Assuming the ridiculously low average of one new movement a month, it can without difficulty be understood that the business of keeping an eye upon all is a sufficient occupation for anyone

who assumes the rôle of an interpreter of the Tendencies of the Age, and Rosamund and her husband regarded themselves as interpreters—that is to say, they invited the exponents of every movement to take tea together in their drawing-room, and once every month they declared themselves (on cards) to be “At Home” from 9.30 p.m. to 1 p.m. to all the friends (and enemies) of every movement of the moment, treating impartially both friends and enemies to sandwiches of various kinds and claret cup, from the moment of their entrance until they gradually disappeared—some to catch trains and others ’buses. The ’buses, as a rule, do a handsome trade in exponents of movements. But neither Rosamund nor her husband showed so much consideration for Reggie as they should have exhibited. The former talked to him about the Scribblers’ Club, and hinted at its being a Power.

She also asked him what he thought of the plays of Peter Paulovna, the great dramatist who was freely referred to as the Shakespeare of Kamschatka, and whose works were being discussed at that moment with great earnestness by the members of the inner circle of the literary brotherhood.

It may be mentioned incidentally that the centre of this inner circle was occupied by the one gentleman who knew sufficient Kamschatkan to translate the works of Peter Paulovna. He

received a royalty on every copy of the translations sold in England ; but, of course, this was merely an incident.

Under these circumstances it could scarcely be expected that Reggie Upmore would come to any other conclusion than that at which he arrived on the subject of his invitation to the Scribblers' Club.

"I'm hanged if I go to meet their Harold Hopeton or any other man of the same breed " was his resolution as he dropped in to lunch at his club. But when his friend, Freddy Langdon, wanted to play a game of billiards with him afterwards, he declined on the ground of an engagement. It was Freddy who had given him so much information the previous day regarding the Scribblers' Club, and yet Reggie did not now hint to him that he could, if he were so minded—but he wasn't so minded—sound to its depths the mystery of a Scribblers' Tea.

Of course he went to the club, after visiting his gunmaker's and discussing some congenial topic such as the left-hand shooting of the right-hand barrel of his latest smooth bore. He had had no intention of going (he tried to persuade himself), but, finding himself in the region of the Strand, he thought it would be discourteous to his sister-in-law not to drop in to the Scribblers' Club and at least "watch that fellow Hopeton swallow his tea"—that was how he put the matter.

He had no difficulty in finding the club. It occupied three rooms of a shy flat in a street off the Strand. He found that Rosamund had only half-a-dozen guests ; two of them were men, and he was presented to both. Neither of them bore the name of Hopeton. Indeed, Reggie perceived in a moment that it would be quite impossible for either of such well-groomed men to have written that iniquitous "Globules." He was also presented to the four women. One of them was a pleasant-looking girl with eyes that he thought were the most sympathetic he had ever seen. Her name was Miss Claremont, and he had not talked with her for half an hour before he had come to the conclusion that she was not merely one of the most sympathetic listeners whom he had ever met, she was the most sensible talker to whom he had ever listened. Moreover, she was one of the Shropshire Claremonts. Her father, she said, had been the General—the younger brother of Sir Mortimer Claremont—and Reggie had been acquainted with the General.

"It's a relief to meet you here, Miss Claremont," said Reggie. "I've had nothing but literary celebrities forced down my throat since I came up to town. I'm assured that they are celebrities, though I never heard their names before. My sister-in-law is ten deep with literary celebrities, and others who are not literary. Why, she coaxed me here this even-

ing holding out that Hopeton fellow as a bait to me. Have you ever met him."

"Hopeton?" said she. "Do you mean Harold Hopeton, the novelist?"

"That's the fellow I was asked to meet," said Reggie. "I'm glad he hasn't turned up. Have you ever met him?"

"I know Harold Hopeton very well," she replied. "And I admit that I have read 'Globules.'"

"Oh."

"I'd advise every one to read it. Why did you say that 'oh,' Mr. Upmore?"

"I was a bit surprised to find that you had read such rubbish, you must admit."

"I certainly don't feel called on to admit anything of the sort. If I thought it rubbish I should have no hesitation in saying so and in advising my friends to have nothing to say to it."

"Will you include me among your friends, Miss Claremont, and advise me to read it? Let me beg of you not to do so; we've agreed together so far on all topics."

"Read 'Globules,' Mr. Upmore."

She was a trifle flushed as she spoke, and there was some laughter in her sympathetic eyes as she looked up to his face.

He paused, his eyes fixed upon hers, before he said,

"I will read it before I sleep ; but you must give me a chance of abusing it to you out of revenge."

"I will give you every chance of abusing it, Mr. Upmore," said she. "But let me remind you that you have already had such a chance and accepted it."

"But that was only half-hearted abuse," said he. "I haven't read it yet, you see."

"That is the most remarkable form of apology I ever heard," she said. "Do you know, I hardly think that it's quite fair to call a book that you haven't read rubbish—that was the word which you made use of in referring to 'Globules,' let me remind you."

"Perhaps it wasn't quite fair," said he. "But I've got a general notion of what the thing is about—something in the problem way, you know—and I think all that sort of thing rubbish."

"Yes ; but it's not, Mr. Upmore," said she. "At any rate, you've no right to call anything that you haven't read, rubbish—so much is quite certain."

He noticed how her cheeks became slightly flushed through the earnestness of her defence of—not exactly the book which was entitled "Globules," but of the general principles of refraining from abusing a book before it is read. He thought that on the whole she looked hand-

somer flushed than pale, though for that matter she was not naturally very pale."

"I apologise to Mr. Hopeton," said Reggie. "I frankly admit that it was grossly unfair of me to abuse him unread; and I promise you that I'll qualify myself for the fairest abuse of him that any friend of his could desire."

"Do you know, Mr. Upmore, I'm beginning to think that even literary society in London could teach you Hampshire gentlemen something of the elements of fair play. One looks to the country, you know, for all the virtues which we hear it would be quite hopeless to seek in town. But during the past five minutes you have given the most hearty condemnation to a book which you confess you have never read, and in apologising for your condemnation of it, you say that you will read the book simply to qualify yourself to abuse it. Now I can assure you that we are much fairer than you in this town. We may abuse books, but we certainly read them first, and when we read them we do so without prejudice—never simply in order to abuse them."

It was now Reggie Upmore's turn to flush. It was a long time since anyone had administered to him such a reproof. But he felt that he had earned it. That was the worst of it: he had a consciousness of having been guilty of something that was not quite fair. After all, the fact of a man's having written a book does not of itself

disentitle him to the treatment which an average man might claim from strangers.

"I feel that I have left myself open to even more than you have said, Miss Claremont."

His admission was made with a sincerity that was not open to question.

She laughed quite pleasantly at his discomfiture.

"I'm glad that you have been brought to see that even a writer of fiction should not be pilloried without being allowed some sort of defence," said she. "I'm sure at any rate that now you'll give poor Harold Hopeton a fair trial."

"You may depend upon me so far, I think," said he; "and I really feel myself beginning to hope that I may after all, like 'Globules.'"

"Oh, no; you must not set about reading it with a desire to like it," she cried. "All that I ask—on behalf of poor Harold Hopeton—is a fair trial—no prejudice one way or another. Good-bye, Mr. Upmore."

"Anyhow, I'm glad that Mr. Hopeton wasn't here this afternoon," said he, as he took her hand. "You and he are clearly such good friends that I should have had a small chance of such a chat with you as you have been good enough to allow me."

Again she gave a little flush and a laugh as she parted from him.

He assured Rosamund as they drove away together shortly afterwards that he had had a delightful afternoon. He didn't know much of the Scribblers, he admitted, but if they were all as sound as Miss Claremont, he didn't think there was much the matter with them.

"And I'm just as glad that your lion didn't turn up," he added.

"My lion? What lion?" asked his sister-in-law.

"What lion? Why Harold Hopeton, of course," he replied. "I don't suppose that my afternoon would have been so pleasant if he had been on the spot: he'd be certain to have absorbed Miss Claremont. I suppose these literary Johnnies have an eye for a good-looking and an agreeable woman as well as more commonplace chaps. Oh, yes; Miss Claremont seems to be a particular friend of his."

"How did you find that out?" asked Rosamond with laughing eyes.

"Very simply: I began to abuse Hopeton before her."

"Heavens! you abused—Harold Hopeton?"

"Soundly. But she took his part, and—by George, Rosamund, she gave me a facer or two."

"How?"

"Well, she said pretty plainly that she thought it too bad of me to pitch into Harold

Hopeton when I admitted that I hadn't read his 'Globules.'"

"She was right there, wasn't she?"

"Of course she was, and I admitted so much, and put sackcloth on my loins and a pinch of ashes on my head. I promised to buy 'Globules' and read it too. She is an extremely nice girl, I think."

"Everyone likes her."

"Including Harold Hopeton, I'll swear."

"Well, that's too difficult a question to pronounce upon all at once."

Rosamund had not spoken immediately after he had made his remark about Harold Hopeton; and when she did speak it was with laughing eyes.

He felt that his surmise was correct: if the novelist had been present at the Scribblers' Club Miss Claremont would not have been by his, Reggie's, side for over half an hour.

"I should like to meet her again," he said to his sister-in-law.

"Then come to my next Tuesday 'At Home.'" said she. "She is almost certain to be there."

"And will you guarantee that Harold Hopeton doesn't turn up?" he said,

"How could I do anything of the sort?" she cried.

"I suppose you couldn't well manage to keep

him in the background while I have another chat with Miss Claremont?"

"Oh, so far as that is concerned—no, I'll promise nothing. There'll be no most favoured nation treaty in force at my house. Come like a man and take your chance. Of course Violet Claremont is greatly admired."

"Of course. How could it be otherwise? And equally as a matter of course she admires men who have distinguished themselves in literature."

"I don't doubt it. She is a girl of good taste and discrimination. I suppose the majority of girls like men who have distinguished themselves in some line. At any rate you'll come to us on Tuesday night?"

"You may depend upon me."

He said good-bye to her at her house, and then, instead of driving straight to his rooms, he walked into Oxford Street and purchased at the nearest bookseller's, a copy of 'Globules.'

It was an hour past midnight when he laid down the book, having come to the last page. He had found it impossible to relinquish it sooner. Even when he had snatched a half hour at a restaurant where he dined, he had propped the book in front of him and had continued reading it.

His feelings on laying it down were somewhat complex. At first he felt that he had

just read one of the best books ever written : but a feeling of bitter shame followed his first impression. He was thoroughly ashamed of himself for the part which he had played in regard to that book. He, a commonplace country squire, knowing little beyond the function of nitrates, and having original ideas on nothing beyond the use of the snaffle—a subject which he had made his own—he had had the effrontery to abuse that book which bore on every page the evidence of being the work of a man who had a profound knowledge of character and a profound sympathy with human nature.

He felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. He had acted like a fool—the worst type of fool—a conceited, and, consequently, an ignorant bucolic, fit only to discuss nitrates with farmers and to take the chair at the monthly sessions. The book touched upon many of those matters which have been regarded as problems from the earliest ages, but it touched upon none without showing the deepest sympathy for the sufferers. There was not a false note in the volume. He could feel so much. There was not a character-study in its pages that did not bear the impress of truth.

He lay awake for hours thinking over the book and appreciating its aims, and his last reflection was that if Miss Claremont loved the author she loved a man who was worthy even of

her. *Even of her.* That was how Reggie had come to think of her.

His first act in the morning was to write to Harold Hopeton. He felt that he could not rest happy until he had taken that step. His letter was a manly straight-forward one. It expressed the pleasure that the writer felt on reading "*Globules*" and his appreciation of the aims of the author, and concluded with a very frank acknowledgment of the great injustice which he, Reginald Upmore, had done to the author in condemning his book before reading it. It was on this account he had, he said, taken a course which he believed to be an unusual one, in writing to the author.

He felt easier in his mind when he had addressed the cover to Harold Hopeton, in the care of the publishers of "*Globules*;" and he did not think it necessary to tell his friend Freddy Langdon anything of this transaction.

He was one of the earliest of the arrivals at Rosamund's "*At Home*" on the following Tuesday night. She, Violet Claremont, was there—there, standing by the side of an intellectual-looking man with whom she was engaged in an animated conversation. Was the man Harold Hopeton, he wondered. He watched him with jealous eyes for some time, and then Miss Claremont noticed him, and sent him out an inviting smile.

He was by her side in a moment, and the other man spoke to some new arrivals.

"Is he Harold Hopeton?" Reggie whispered to Miss Claremont.

"He? Who? What? Oh, that is Sir Richard Blundell, home on leave from the Calapash Islands—he's the Administrator, you know," replied Miss Claremont. "Are you anxious to avoid Harold Hopeton, Mr. Upmore?"

"No, I assure you," he said with all humility. "I never was so much ashamed of myself in all my life as I am in regard to him. What a book it is! Oh, what a fool I was! And you, knowing what a book it was and what a fool I was, could still have patience with me that evening when we met at the Scribblers'! You are the most generous of women."

"I'm afraid I cannot say that I was altogether patient," said she. "But I felt certain that you were a just man, and I believe thoroughly in the book."

"A just man!" he cried. "Heavens! I never felt more ashamed of myself than I did when I had read the first chapter. I'll let you into a secret: I felt so strongly that I had behaved like a cad, that I wrote a letter to the author confessing all—I felt that I must either do that or take the first train home."

"I knew that I was not mistaken in you," said she. "You are a just man."

"If he is here to-night I may have a chance of telling him face to face all that I think regarding him. You know him well, I suppose, Miss Claremont?"

He detected the little flush, the little smile, the little hesitancy, before she replied :

"Oh, yes, I think I know Harold Hopeton pretty well—the fact is we were children together. We have been the closest friends ever since."

"I see. And you probably knew all about 'Globules' before it was published?"

"Oh, dear, yes; I knew all about it. Its progress from day to day interested me greatly."

"And yet you treated me with courtesy—absolute courtesy—when I called it rubbish without having read it! You are the most generous woman alive!"

She laughed.

"You see, I looked forward to the next time that we should meet."

"And so did I."

That was probably true; and when he assured her half an hour later that he was looking forward to meeting her again he was speaking the truth. He felt that she was not merely the most beautiful woman whom he had ever met, but the most sympathetic, the most *spirituelle* as well. But he remembered her little pause and her little

flush as she referred to her close relations with Harold Hopeton. Reggie felt that she had been very sweet and gracious to him ; but it would be impossible for him to misinterpret those signs. She was in love with Harold Hopeton.

Well, he felt as he strolled to his rooms that Harold Hopeton was worthy of her, and that impression lasted for close upon twenty minutes. At the end of that time he flung his cigar into the grate and himself into an easy chair, crying :

“A damn shame that a girl like that should be thrown away upon an author !”

His feelings for the author of “Globules” during the next few days were of the most respectful kind. Could anything be more respectful than the salutes of two duelists who are waiting the signal to run each other through the vitals ?

He would have liked to run Harold Hopeton through the most vital of his vitals ; but meantime he thought of him with the deepest respect.

A river party given by Rosamund made him certain of himself. By one of those mysterious interpositions of Providence, supplemented by an experienced hostess, he found himself engaged in packing away the remnants of a lunch in a basket. He was kneeling at one side of the basket and Miss Claremont was kneeling at the other. No other human being was in sight. He had met her three times since they had spent

that pleasant half hour together in one of Rosamund's drawing-rooms ; and that was why, when their hands came together over the ruins of a *paté*, he would not let her hands go.

A short time afterwards they sat down together on the lunch basket, and he endeavoured to explain to her how he had come to love her, and even to hope that at some date—he didn't mind how distant it might be, she might be induced to give him the priceless treasure of her love.

"Mr. Upmore," she said, "I think it right to tell you that I am bound to Harold Hopeton. Surely you must have heard something of this."

He got upon his feet slowly, painfully, and stood before her with his hands in his pockets.

"I heard nothing of it," he said. "I may have surmised something of it ; but I thought—and you love Harold Hopeton ?"

There was a long pause before she said :

"I think I—I—Well, I like you better !"

"My God !" he cried, "you consider yourself bound to him, though you care more about someone else ? For heaven's sake do not wreck your life through a mistaken sense of honour."

"I don't think that I shall wreck my life," she said, but not very hopefully.

"Let me implore of you to think before it is too late what you are about to do," he cried. "Oh, my beloved, I know how terrible is the delusion of those who mistake a feeling of friend-

ship for one of love. You say you have known him all your life?"

"I have known Harold Hopeton all my life," she said. "And, oh, it is impossible for anyone to come between us now."

"Listen to me, my dearest," he said, seating himself once more beside her. "Listen to me. You must not do this thing. I myself will go to Harold Hopeton and tell him the truth—I feel certain he will understand: no one could write such a book as 'Globules' without being able to understand—why, the whole book turns upon the difference between friendship and love!"

"What will you tell Harold Hopeton?"

"I will tell him that I love you—that you love me. Oh, yes; you needn't raise your hand in that deprecating way. You love me; I know it, I feel it, and he will see how it would be the ruin of both our lives for you to carry out your early compact. Oh, I have every confidence in Harold Hopeton."

"Ah," she said, "I hope your confidence may not be misplaced."

Before he could do more than make a grab for her hand, some of the boating party appeared, and the return voyage was made to Teddington.

Before he slept he wrote to Harold Hopeton another very frank letter, asking that distinguished author to give him an hour in which

they could talk over some "urgent private affairs," and the next day he received a reply informing him that the writer hoped to have the pleasure of meeting his correspondent at the reception of a certain Mrs. Bennett Wyse on the following night. Now, it so happened that Reginald Upmore had received a card for Mrs. Bennett Wyse's reception ; and though he questioned the possibility of his being able to speak for more than a few minutes to so distinguished an author as Harold Hopeton at such a function, he could not but accept the suggestion made in the letter.

He arrived rather late at Mrs. Bennett Wyse's house, so that his hostess had a few minutes' breathing space. She utilized a portion of her leisure by enquiring if there was any person to whom Mr. Upmore wished to be presented.

"You are very good," said he. "I am particularly anxious to be presented to Harold Hopeton."

"Come along," said she. "You and the author of 'Globules' should get on well together."

Mr. Upmore was beginning to doubt it ; but he followed the lady through the groups of her guests until they were opposite Violet Claremont. She was talking to an undersized sallow man.

"Great heaven!" thought Reginald, when his

hostess stopped. "Great heaven! And that unhealthy looking thing is Harold Hopeton—my rival."

"Miss Claremont," said Mrs. Bennett Wyse, "I hope you will allow me to present to you Mr. Reginald Upmore."

"I beg your pardon," said Reginald, "I have already the pleasure of knowing Miss Claremont. It is Mr. Harold Hopeton whom I am anxious to meet."

Once again he looked toward the little sallow man.

"What!" cried Mrs. Bennett Wyse, "have you been in town for three weeks without hearing that Violet Claremont is the Harold Hopeton of 'Globules' fame? Oh, happy Hampshire!"

He stared at her for a long time. Then he laughed quite pleasantly.

He said he thought he could give her an ice. . . .

And he gave her one—yes, when they were alone in a conservatory.

THE PRINCE OF THE
SCHWABS.

THE PRINCE OF THE SCHWABS.

THE chivalrous spirit of the Middle Ages was possibly never more powerful in its influence than during the reign of Sergius XVI. of West Schwabia, a Prince whose constant aim was to advance the noble principles of knighthood, and to act up to the high standard, not exactly of morality, but of courtesy professed by all who belonged to the order. He was regarded, both by his own subjects and those of Prince Paulus XV. of Syringia, as the embodiment of all the virtues of chivalry ; and when it is remembered that the Syringians were hereditary enemies to the Schwabs the value of the testimony of the latter to the excellent qualities of Prince Sergius will be fully appreciated. The Syringians were, of course, careful to an-

nounce that in acknowledging the worth of Prince Sergius, they were regarding him not in the light of a Prince but only as a man. As a Prince they declared that they held him in abhorrence, and never uttered his name without a qualification that would probably have been very hurtful to the feelings of the Prince had he heard it ; but as a Knight they regarded him with an admiration that was not surpassed even by his own courtiers, who were paid handsomely for their services in this direction, or, to be more exact, were promised remuneration on a generous scale for their attentions to their royal master—for Sergius XVI. was one of the most promising of Princes. He was never known to refuse to promise anything that might be asked by a courtier approaching him in a proper spirit. As a Knight the Prince was constantly expressing his obligations to his hereditary enemies for their good opinion of him, which, he declared, it would be his study to deserve ; but as a Prince having certain duties to perform, he invariably cut the hands and ears off every Syringian he chanced to get a hold of. The scrupulous manner in which he discharged his duty in this respect made him somewhat unpopular among the Syringians. But he was only unpopular as a Prince ; the feeling of regard for him as a Knight remained without a rupture.

So many Syringians, however, were earless

and handless in the course of the year—for the amiable Prince Sergius exhibited singular dexterity in capturing his hereditary enemies and in curtailing their members and features in the manner indicated—that Prince Paulus began to think that however interesting it would be for him to become monarch of a single-handed and solitary-eared people, it might be as well, all things considered, to exhibit a little self-abnegation in this respect, and forego the ambition of occupying so unique a place among sovereigns. So at a Cabinet Council he formulated his views on the subject at considerable length, and found them fully sympathised with by those members of the Government who had seats in the Cabinet. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was accordingly instructed to open negotiations for the conclusion of a treaty between West Schwabia and Syringia. Finding a messenger who, having lost both ears and both hands, was certain to be treated courteously by Prince Sergius, the terms of the suggested peace were conveyed to that monarch.

Contemporary chroniclers state that had not the Foreign Minister of the Syringians shown such discretion in the choice of a messenger, Prince Sergius would have contented himself with tearing into shreds the rough draft of the peace suggestions, and making an example of the bearer ; but through the prudence and fore-

thought of the Syringian Minister the possibility of his doing either was reduced to a minimum. The draft of the proposals was engrossed upon the toughest vellum, and the messenger had already been made an example of. Prince Sergius, being an honourable man, when he saw that he could neither tear the parchment nor deprive the bearer of his ears, accepted the alternative with resignation. The terms of the treaty were laid before the Schwabian Parliament and in due course accepted, with certain modifications that made the prospective peace particularly advantageous to the Schwabs. The Syringians did not, however, demur at this. They had so come to regard the Schwabians' getting the better of them upon every occasion as the natural condition of things, that they did not now complain that the Prince, whose high standard of rectitude they all admitted, had once again acted in accordance with the traditions of the noble house to which he belonged.

There were great rejoicings throughout both principalities when the treaty had been signed. Trade had long been languishing in Syringia, but now there was a prospect of a revival, and the jewellers, whose stock of rings and ear-rings had not recently found a ready sale, now foresaw a likelihood of business. The Schwabians on their part rejoiced because it was an understood thing that so soon as peace could be concluded

with their hereditary enemies, a campaign would be commenced against the Glacerians—Glaceria was a rich kingdom in the South that would well repay the trouble and anxiety of a campaign ; and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to Prince Sergius—a minister whose office was not an agreeable one at any time—had long entertained a hope that the deficits in the Budgets for the previous eleven years would be made good by a war with Glaceria.

The occasion of the proclamation of peace was one of general public rejoicing throughout Syringia. The Court of Prince Paulus had never been remarkable for its brilliancy, but now it resolved that for once at any rate it would rival its neighbours, and astonish even Prince Sergius, who was to be the guest of Prince Paulus during the festivities. When the Prince arrived, bringing with him a hundred men at arms, in case of accident, and three personal attendants, whose sole duty it was to taste at the banquets given in his honour of every dish before partaking of it himself, in case it should contain any indigestible ingredient, he confessed himself astonished at the magnificence of all he saw, and sincerely regretted that he had accepted the negotiations for peace under the impression that he had taken from the Syringians all that was worth having. He now perceived that the campaign might have been profitably carried on for

another six months, and might have, perhaps, paid its expenses for an entire year. The festivities were extremely imposing, contemporary chroniclers state ; and, indeed, there is every reason to believe that their description of the ceremonies was not exaggerated, for it is recorded that upon the last day of the merry-making, nine Jews, who had refused to contribute more than their legal share toward the expenses, were burnt alive. When it is known that such a piece of childish extravagance was indulged in—for nine Jews, if used with discretion, should have served to amuse the Court for a year—it must be admitted that the accounts of the display at the capital of Syringia are quite credible.

Before the departure of Prince Sergius for his own Court he had received from his host several marks of distinction, including the massive bracelets of the Order of St. Manacle, and in return he had offered Prince Paulus the hempen collar of the illustrious Order of St. Johannes de Ketch. The exchange of courtesies was regarded with great approbation by the people, but an incident occurred at the moment of the Prince's setting out for his own state that was followed by important results. The Prince had admired the march past of the regiment of Syringian Guards (Black), and when his host offered to confer on him the colonelcy of the regiment, he, in the

exuberance of the moment, accepted the offer. Then at the head of the men Prince Sergius rode past the Royal Standard of Syringia, and saluted Prince Paulus amid the acclamations of the spectators. The next day he left for Schwabia drinking the stirrup cup—after his host had quaffed about half a pint to show that it was perfectly wholesome—at the gate of the palace in due form.

But in spite of the hospitable manner in which he had been received at the Syringian Court—nay, on account of the liberality that had been shown to him, Prince Sergius, before six months had passed, had recalled his representative from the Court of Prince Paulus, and had once more declared war against the Syringians. The fact was, his Chancellor of the Exchequer had heard about the shameful waste of Jews at the festivities, and had reproached his royal master for having so easily signed the treaty of peace.

“There is no nation so rich, Sire,” said the Chancellor regretfully, “as to be in a position to burn more than two of the Hebrew race at the same pyre; and yet these Syringians do not think it necessary to economize such valuable material—such sources of gold.”

“Nay, good Mr. Chancellor,” replied the Prince, endeavouring to smile, “there was not a tooth among the entire nine; every molar, every incisor, every grinder had been extracted by

Brother Paulus in previous years, in an attempt to make each of the nine contribute to the treasury. Depend upon it, there was not one of the lot that anything could be got out of."

"A Jew, Sire, is an animated mint," said the shrewd Chancellor. "If he has no money to-day, he will have some to-morrow; if not to-morrow the day after. I do not doubt that none of the nine, who in the generous impulse of Prince Paulus were burned together in your honour and to the glory of God, was worth a stiver—for Prince Paulus is a gallant Knight, and would not burn a Jew so long as the said Jew had the smallest fraction of any value—still I cannot help thinking that the squandering of so many wealth-collecting animals is strong presumptive evidence that there is money still in Syringia."

"There is a good deal in what you say," replied the Prince, thoughtfully. "Yes, I think we had better have another go at the Syringians. But upon what pretext can we do so, Mr. Chancellor? There is the treaty——"

"Parchment for battledores," cried the Minister, with a laugh.

"But, hang it all, we cannot go to war without some shadow of an excuse," said the Prince.

"Pooh! my lord the Prince," replied the other, "where there's a will there's a way. The Syringians have a standing army; a standing

army is always more or less a menace. Let us declare that we feel ourselves menaced by the standing army, and the thing is done."

"But we have a standing army also," said the Prince.

"You cannot call it a standing army if it is on the march to Syringia," said the Chancellor, making an obeisance. Then he straightened himself, and continued, gravely, "The fact is, Sire, we must have money somehow. The Budget deficit for the present year will be enormous. Now, as the Syrigians are our hereditary enemies, it would be unreasonable to suppose that we should seek to replenish the State chest by other means than an expedition to Syringia."

"It would," said the Prince; "you are quite right. We will go at them again. Heredity is a natural law, we all know; and in spoiling a hereditary enemy we are but fulfilling a law of nature—a natural instinct."

"Exactly so," said the Minister, endeavouring to preserve his gravity; "the laws of nature are inexorable. Will it please Your Grace to give directions to the Foreign Office to order the withdrawal of the Schwabian representative from the Court of Paulus?"

"Not a moment shall be lost," replied the Prince, hurrying out in search of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and for War, leaving the Chancellor of the Exchequer rubbing his hands

contentedly at the window as he watched his royal master striding down the street.

Thus it came about that Prince Paulus received a notification to prepare for war at his earliest convenience ; and the inhabitants of the Principality were moved to say some very hard things regarding Prince Sergius. They were, however, careful only to speak harshly of him as a Prince ; not a word reflecting upon his private character was breathed. And when the mob burnt his effigy in the market-place, they were careful to place upon its brows a tinsel crown, so that they might not be accused of discourtesy towards the Prince as an individual.

The belligerent movement was not altogether popular in Schwabia ; but the Prince assured his people that he was going to war altogether on a point of conscience. He had found that a disregard of any natural law was attended by disastrous consequences ; and the Syringians being a law of nature, it was clearly a portion of the scheme of creation that the Syringians should be attacked by the Schwabs. Looking at the matter in this light, the people could not be otherwise than satisfied. Only the women, poor things, could not be brought to see the justice of taking such a step ; but the women of Schwabia differed from the women of the rest of the world, in not being amenable to argument.

Prince Sergius was in high spirits during

these days, for his conscience had really smitten him when he saw the nine Jews burning together on the one afternoon. All the enjoyment to be derived from so interesting a pyrotechnic display was damped by the reproaches of the still small voice within him, which told him he had not done his duty toward his subjects in making peace with a State that could afford to squander so much wealth-producing material. Now, however, his inward upbraiding ceased. He was doing his best to retrieve his error. He was happy in the consciousness that he was now doing his best.

A few days after the return of the Schwabian representative from Syringia, however, the Syringian messenger, who possessed such singular qualifications for the post he occupied, appeared at the palace of Prince Sergius and delivered an official document, addressed :—

*Colonel Sergius,
Syringian Guards (Black),
Sneezankoff Palace,
Schwabia.*

On breaking the seals of this document, the Court Reader informed Prince Sergius that it was simply an order from Prince Paulus, as the head of the Syringian army, to the colonel of the Guards (Black) to join his regiment without a moment's delay.

Prince Sergius was thunderstruck. He had

not remembered before that moment the position he occupied in the Syringian service. When he had accepted the command of the Guards (Black) he had not counted on being called out on active service with the regiment, but now he saw he was in the power of the Prince of his hereditary enemies. In the impulse of the moment he gave certain directions to his Chamberlain respecting the entertainment of the messenger who had conveyed the regimental order to the Palace ; but when the Chamberlain hastened out with the Court shears, he found that the messenger had recollected an important engagement which he had felt bound to fulfil at home the moment he had delivered the document. He hoped that the Prince would on this ground excuse the precipitancy of his return, and not attribute it to any desire to be discourteous.

A Cabinet Council was summoned without delay to the official residence of the Premier, and the question of the Prince's liability to serve with the Syringian Guards (Black) in the forthcoming campaign was discussed in all its bearings. The position of the Prince was acknowledged to be embarrassing in the extreme. Being a man of honour he declared that it would be impossible for him to keep away from the regiment of which he was colonel now that danger was threatening it ; at the same time he

admitted that he would have considerable difficulty directing the campaign of the Schwabs against the Syringians if he himself were at the head of a Syringian regiment. The Ministers shook their heads, and would have been well content had the Prince accepted this demonstration of wisdom as an expression of opinion, but he would not do so. He drew his sword and swore that not a Minister should leave the chamber until a decision had been come to on the question before the council. As the Ministers were all unarmed they ceased shaking their heads, and the desire to be unanimous in their judgment as to what course the Prince should pursue was intensified by certain threatening gestures of Sergius XVI. towards the Head of the Government. The Head of the Government wore at the instigation of his wife, who was a prudent woman, and put not her trust in princes, a large collar of great rigidity, guaranteed by the maker to resist the fiercest attack of the most impetuous potentate.

The decision of the Council was unanimous. The ministers declared that the Prince was bound in honour to report himself at the headquarters of the regiment of which he was colonel. Immediately after recording this decision the ministry resigned, some of the members doing so through the open windows, and five of them in a confused heap through one of the doors. The

Chancellor of the Exchequer and the First Lord of the Admiralty, having got quietly under the Council board, pulling down the green cloth at one side, was enabled to resign with less precipitancy when the Prince had left the chamber.

Sergius XVI. was, however, a thorough sovereign as well as a knight of unblemished honour, and the same evening he sent for the late Premier, and declared that he would abide by the decision of the Council and depart for his regiment. He felt, he said, that it was demanded of his knighthood to espouse the weaker cause, and he thought, he certainly hoped, that in joining the Syringians he was joining the weaker side. This announcement was received with acclamation by the populace as soon as it became known. Bands paraded the streets of the capital playing the Schwabian National Hymn, and torchlight processions were formed in front of the Palace. A Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association held a meeting at which it was resolved to present the Prince with an illuminated address congratulating him upon his departure.

The interest of the evening reached its highest point, however, when the Prince appeared on one of the balconies, and declared to the crowd that if anything could strengthen his resolve to accept unflinchingly the duty which he was called on by the force of circumstances to per-

form, it would be witnessing the enthusiasm which the announcement of his departure from their midst had aroused among his subjects. The rejoicings which he observed among all classes of the people were, he said, beyond what the most exacting of sovereigns could wish for ; and should he return in safety it would be his study to act toward his subjects in such a way as should give them room upon the next occasion of his departure to be equally enthusiastic.

Before leaving his capital Prince Sergius drew up a plan of the campaign, which he instructed his marshals to carry out to the letter. He made a stirring speech, bidding farewell to his army, assuring the men that though absent from them, owing to circumstances over which he had no control, his heart would still be with them. Though, as Colonel of the Syringian Guards (Black), he would do his best for the Syringians, yet, as Prince of the Schwabs, he could not but hope that his efforts on behalf of the Syringians would prove unsuccessful. The soldiers, of course, perceived the excellence of this assurance, and so with every demonstration of loyalty the army said farewell to their Prince.

"Colonel Sergius, I must really apologise for having put you to so much trouble," said Prince Paulus when the conscientious Schwab reported himself at the Syringian War Office. "I must really apologise ; I assure you I would not have

sent for you only that I shall need every man holding rank in my army to oppose this brutal and utterly uncalled-for attack upon our beloved country by a Prince whose conduct can be qualified only by the strongest adjectives in the Syringian tongue." The unhappy Sergius knew, of course, that Prince Paulus referred to his conduct as a Prince, not as an individual, consequently he could not take offence. "If I only had a few years of peace," continued Prince Paulus, while Sergius stood at the attitude of attention, "I would endeavour to carry out the dream of my life—the unification of the Syringian provinces. My hope has always been to found a Syringian Empire. You can go now, Colonel Sergius. I will inspect your regiment in person to-morrow."

Colonel Sergius saluted, then wheeled and marched out of the War Office. The next day he appeared at the head of the regiment of Syringian Guards (Black), and was complimented by Prince Paulus upon the fine physique and steadiness of the regiment. He also took part in the Council of Officers held in the evening, and was made acquainted with the plan of defence of the Commander-in-Chief. He saw at once that it would break down within half-an-hour from the moment an attack was made by the Schwabs, but to reveal this to the Council he did not consider would be honourable to his

subjects. The only remarks that he made at the Council had reference to the working of the Commissariat Department. He endeavoured to impress upon the Prince the importance of making this branch of the service as complete as possible, and his remarks were listened to with the deepest attention.

It is unnecessary to repeat the details which contemporary chronicles give of the famous campaign that ensued. On the third day after the arrival of Colonel Sergius the Schwabian scouts were seen in the distance. The Syringians, in accordance with the strategical system they had always pursued when the enemy came in sight, retreated. The next day a slight skirmish took place, in which a bugler was severely wounded owing to his having ventured too close to the horse of the colonel of his regiment. The animal had a prominent bone or two, and the lad, coming in contact with one of the creature's strongest points, received an abrasion of the shoulder. He was carried off the field by his mother, an armistice being granted to admit of his removal in safety.

The next day, however, the celebrated battle of Ditchbach was fought. The entire opposing forces met upon this occasion, so that there could not have been much less than six hundred men-at-arms on the field. At the head of the sixteen men composing the Syringian Guards (Black),

Sergius looked a gallant knight and an honourable one, as was said by those of the chroniclers who were subsidised by the Schwabs. In the morning stirring addresses were delivered by the Commander to each army.

"Syringians," said Prince Paulus, "remember the traditions of your fathers. Do not demean yourselves by asking quarter—do not yield to the enemies of your country—do not allow yourselves to be taken prisoners alive. Think of your noble sires—nay, of your dear wives and families. Should the worst come to the worst think of them, and—run!"

This spirited address was enthusiastically received by the army, and they swore to a man that sooner than be taken prisoners they would leave the field.

The Syringian Guards occupied, as usual, the post of honour in the rear of the army. The Syringian Generals were sensible men, and knowing that the foremost ranks nearly always were hardly dealt with, assigned to that position the worst regiments, keeping the crack troops as far removed from danger as possible.

The fight began about noon with a shower of arrows from the sixty stalwart bowmen on either side; but all fell short. Then the men-at-arms advanced, and the most fearful carnage ensued, no fewer than seven men being left for dead. Prince Paulus had retired to a

neighbouring hill to watch the battle, and he saw how nobly Sergius was urging on his men, he himself maintaining, with praiseworthy firmness, his position in the rear. Unhappily, however, a flank movement was made by the Schwabs. The gallant regiment of Guards (Black) found themselves face to face with the enemy. Perceiving that in a few moments they should be surrounded and made prisoners, they were impelled, by a strong sense of duty towards their wives and families, to avert such a disaster. They consequently threw away their arms, and thus unencumbered made for the open.

Now, though it is impossible to overestimate the advantages of a position in the rear of a force moving forward to an attack, yet in case of a retreat such a position is frequently one of embarrassment. Thus it happened that Colonel Sergius, before he could get to the front of his men to lead their retreat, was surrounded by the Schwabs and made prisoner. He bore the disaster with the utmost equanimity, for he seemed to feel that it would not do for him to betray his emotion to his captors ; and the victorious army, kowing how to respect such a quality as self-possession in the hour of calamity, accepted his *parole* of honour that he would not attempt to escape, and then pressed on in pursuit of the flying Syringians. But pursuit was absolutely ridiculous, all that was seen of the enemy was

a thin line of helmets rapidly disappearing beneath the horizon.

Sergius, being thus relieved from his command of the crack regiment of his country's enemy, was, of course, free to resume his functions as Prince. But he was too honourable a Knight to lead his own army against the Syringian capital in this campaign. He marched with them off the ensanguined field, and was brought prisoner to his own palace.

"Now, this is a bad business, my liege," said the Chancellor. "The state chest is still empty; this has been a singularly unprofitable campaign."

"We shall see what can be done to improve matters," said the Prince. "I have a plan that I think will open the eyes of Paulus and his friends. Send for the Secretary for War."

The Minister for War arrived without delay, and then Sergius unfolded his plan. A communication was sent to the Syringian Government in the name of the Prince of Schwabia, stating that during the recent campaign an officer holding high rank in the Syringian Army had been taken prisoner, and that the Schwabian Government were prepared to receive an offer for his ransom. Without wishing to dictate to the Syringian Government what sum would be reasonable to name, the Schwabian War Office would venture to suggest that a hundred thou-

sand crowns would be about the lowest figure that could be accepted as ransom for the captured officer.

A note was appended to this dispatch stating that every law of honour and courtesy demanded that the Syringians should ransom their officer and not allow him to languish in a Schwabian dungeon. It was also hinted in this note that to offer a less sum than one hundred thousand crowns for the ransom would be to pay such a bad compliment to the captive officer that he might be tempted to resent.

Prince Paulus received this communication and read it through the medium of a clerk—for the Prince did not do much in that way himself—with mixed emotions. The official part of the document he was tempted to regard as a joke; but the short postscript caused him to perceive that the intentions of the writer were by no means jocular. At first he swore that he would never submit to such an imposition. "The notion of paying a man for his own ransom was preposterous," he declared. But, on summoning a Cabinet Council he found that all the ministers were decidedly of the opinion that the ransom should be paid.

"It is a matter in which the honour of the country is involved," said the Prime Minister. "The Prince of Schwabia showed how sensitive he is on such points by obeying the order of

our War Office and joining his regiment at a critical moment ; it is our part to show to him that the Syringians are equally punctillious. Yes ; the hundred thousand crowns must be paid."

"Very well," said the Prince ; "but if I pay the money I shall get value for it. If I ransom the Colonel of my Guards I will take care that he comes on duty with his regiment once again, and when he is here I will make his life such a burden to him he will gladly return me his ransom, and a good round sum into the bargain, to set him free."

The shrewdness of the Prince was gladly admired by the entire ministry, and the sum for the ransom was voted the same night when the Lower Chamber went into Committee of Supply ; so that by the end of the week Prince Sergius received from the hands of a trusty messenger the bags containing the hundred thousand crowns. Having ascertained that none of the coins were light and that the number was correct, the Prince sent the messenger back to Syringia with a stamped receipt and half-a-crown for himself. Immediately afterwards a military council was held at the Schwabian War Office with closed doors, so that no one knew what was its object.

The next day the Prince received an official document from the Syringian Field-Marshal

Commander-in-Chief ordering Colonel Sergius to rejoin his regiment without delay.

Prince Sergius as soon as the document was read to him lay back on his chair in a paroxysm of laughter. When he had recovered, he called for his Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and his Chief Scribe.

Two days afterwards the Foreign Minister of Syringia received an official memorandum from the Schwabian Foreign Office, which ran as follows :—

“SIR,—With reference to the communication addressed to one Colonel Sergius, late of the regiment of Syringian Guards (Black), by the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief the Syringian forces, I have the honour to inform you that Colonel Sergius, on the ransom being paid for his release, was immediately set at liberty. A sworn information having, however, been laid before the local authorities in this city to the effect that the said Colonel Sergius was a native of West Schwabia, he was immediately re-arrested according to the Schwabian law, which makes it a capital offence for any native of the country to be found in arms in opposition to the Schwabian forces. I have also the honour to inform you that the said Colonel Sergius was subsequently tried by court-martial and sentenced to death. The warrant has not yet been signed by Prince Sergius, but when the royal signature is

appended the Syringian War Office will be duly apprised of the fact.

“I have, &c.,

“LUPUS,

*“Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs
to Prince Sergius of West Schwabia.”*

At the end of the official document there was also a short note.

* * * “All correspondence on this subject must now cease.”

When this communication was received by Prince Paulus and duly read, he made use of some words regarding Prince Sergius that gave the courtiers standing around reason to believe that he felt very strongly on the subject. He also sent for his secretary, and dictated a very severe letter to Sergius. After the lapse of a week, however, he received this very letter in a tattered and pulpy condition from the District Coroner of West Schwabia, accompanied by a courteous note from that official, stating that the letter had been discovered in the pocket of a native of Syringia, who had been, according to the verdict of the jury, “found drowned,” in the River Slush, on the confines of Schwabia.

The Prince thought he had better not pursue the matter further, and at this point the affair terminated.

THE ICONOCLAST.

THE ICONOCLAST.

“**M**Y dear Robert there’s a bright side to everything, even a honeymoon,” said Dick Carver to his friend Robert Spearing, giving him at the same time a slap on the back that may have been encouraging—it certainly was staggering.

“I don’t think that overstated the ridiculous, the unreasonable characteristics of honeymoons in general,” said Robert, so soon as he had recovered from the effects of his friend’s exuberance. “Of course I believe that Rose and I are too sensible to behave like the general run of silly brides and bridegrooms, as they call them.”

“And what else would you call them?” cried Dick.

“Oh, for that matter——”

“Now, you needn’t try on your sophistries with me, my friend. You can no more help

being bride and bridegroom after you get married than you could help being a baby for some time after you were born. Of course it's a humiliating reflection, but it might be worse, yes, very much worse. It was suggested the other day in the office that you were born at the age of twelve; and that's how it comes that, although you're only thirty-one, you have the wisdom and sedateness of a man of forty-three. I don't believe in that theory, Robert, plausible though it sounds, and tending as it does to account for a great deal that seemed unaccountable; no, I don't believe in it; but if you go on talking much longer in the strain which you assumed just now, upon my word I think I'll have to believe it in self-protection."

"I only talked sense and reason."

"That's just it. What business has any man talking sense and reason when he's within a week of his wedding-day? It isn't healthy."

"If talking the opposite to sense and reason indicates health, Dick, you're robust enough in all conscience. Why should a man make a fool of himself because he happens to be about to get married?"

"Why, indeed? But there are other ways of a man making a fool of himself besides getting married. As you would put it in one of your phrases—the phrases of the complete letter-

writer—there are other avenues to folly besides marriage.”

“There are. You are in a position to pronounce an opinion on that subject. Is there any avenue leading in that direction that you haven’t yet tried, friend Dick?”

“Look here, Robert, old man, take the advice of a man who has had his eyes open so wide all his life that nothing that happens could open them wider. Give up this notion of yours. When you get married clear off, like other people, to the ‘Continong’ for a month, and stay at all the expensive hotels in the most expensive style, and you’ll find that you’ll come home a wiser and a merrier man.”

“Yes, you want us to be as idiotic as other people of our acquaintance, whose resources are crippled for the first year—perhaps the first three years of their married life—through having thrown their money about on a senseless honeymoon. No, my dear Dick, we’ve no intention of being such fools. As I told you just now, we mean to act as early as possible on those principles which we hope to adopt for the rest of our lives.”

“You’ll find that it costs a good deal to be unlike other people. To begin married life by sneering at the names bride and bridegroom is a trifle paradoxical, isn’t it? Well, I wish you luck. I for one will look forward with great

interest to the result of your experiment. People are trying all sorts of social experiments nowadays, especially on the subject of marrying and giving in marriage. Who knows but your name will be handed down to posterity as 'The Man Who Wouldn't have a Honeymoon—the man who tried to abolish the bride and bridegroom as a social institution.'

Robert gave a laugh—a sort of superior laugh—not the ordinary laugh of the Government clerk at the ordinary jest of the Government office.

"However the experiment may turn out, your cynical ideas on the subject of marriage will remain unchanged, Dick—of that I am certain," said he, his superior laugh giving place to a superior smile.

"Cynical ideas! You needn't accuse me of having cynical ideas," said Dick. "I told you long ago that I believe thoroughly in marriage as the most honourable preliminary to a brilliant widowhood. There's nothing cynical in that. If my definition has a weak point at all it is in its exuberant optimism. That's the last word I have to say on the subject."

The two shook hands and parted, the one to go to his club in a street off Piccadilly, the other to a house furnished in Tottenham Court Road to discuss with an expert the important question of a curtain pole.

The discovery of the curtain pole had for the previous week given rise to as much speculation and perturbation in the mind of Robert Spearing as the discovery of the magnetic pole had in the minds of other people, perhaps more adventurous than he had ever been. But to do him justice he had never allowed the fact of the topic being an engrossing one to him to interfere with his daily duties at the Annexation Office among the list of the clerical staff of which he occupied a highly honourable position. He had never once confused the Morea with the Crimea, and Corea remained in his mind as a place far apart from either. It usually takes a clerk in the Annexation Office from five to seven years to get a firm grasp of the geography of the Crimea, the Morea and Corea.

He was a remarkably conscientious man—for a Government clerk, but he had once been cautioned by his chief, the distinguished minister of the department of Annexation, against carrying his conscientiousness too far. Unless he were gifted with counteracting virtues it might, the minister said, eventually lead to embarrassment. Robert believed that his chief was so assiduous in cultivating the counteracting virtues that the department would not require for a long time to come any curtailment of his own conscientiousness.

He had lately become engaged to marry a very

charming girl named Rose Arkell, the only daughter of a doctor in excellent practice in the North of London. He had known her practically all her life, for her family and his had been neighbours for several years. From her earliest girlhood Rose had seemed very sweet in his eyes, and for some years he had longed—as much as a conscientious Government clerk allows himself to long—for such promotion as would enable him to start housekeeping with the girl who had once in an outburst of confidence told him that she loved him. Promotion came in due course—it does come sometimes even in Government departments—and he allowed himself a day's happiness (Rose allowed herself a month) in anticipating the starting of a home on the soundest economic principles.

It must be confessed that when the third month of their formal engagement was reached, and, when Robert ventured to suggest to his fiancée the desirability of their making a new departure as regards the spending of the honeymoon—this new departure entailing no departure for the novel Continental trip—Rose pouted a little. She did not enter with any great measure of enthusiasm into his ideas on this point.

Everyone went abroad on being married, she had said ; and she was able to bring forward the names of several of her own friends in the northern suburb who had gone, some of them as far as

Boulogne and Dieppe for their honeymoon tour. What would people think if she were not placed on the same level as her friends—those of her friends who had got married within the year ?

Of course Robert was able to point out to her in the most reasonable manner, that if other people choose to behave foolishly in giving way to the prejudices of society, that was no reason why he and she should be equally foolish. His close reasoning had no impression upon her for some days, and it seemed as if they were to be permanently divided on this simple question. Certainly on the evening of the fourth day of their difference, as Robert walked home after a couple of hours of earnest reasoning with the young lady, he could not help feeling that there was a very considerable foundation of truth in the common report of the obstinacy of girls and their incapacity to appreciate the force of argument.

It was just while he was engaged in thinking out this matter that Mrs. Arkell was having a quiet little chat with her daughter on the subject of the obstinacy of men, taking occasion to point out to her the remarkable change which men undergo in this respect after marriage—that is, if properly managed. Had Rose ever known her father to remain obstinate in opposition to his wife ? she inquired ; and Rose was forced to

admit that her father was one of the most tractable of men so far as his wife was concerned.

"And yet he was as pig-headed and as strong-willed as Robert before we were married," said Robert's mother-in-law elect. "Take my advice, Rose," she added, "let him have his way in the matter of the honeymoon; it's a foolish fad of his, and I can see that he has his heart set on carrying it out. You'll have no difficulty carrying him off to the Continent when he gets his holiday next year."

"But what will people say in the meantime?" asked Rose.

"Let them say what they please. What you'll say is simply that Robert is so invaluable to the Annexation office Sir Ecroyd could not spare him just now when the Samoan question has to be decided before the meeting of Parliament."

Thus it was that when Robert paid his visit the next evening he found that there was no need for him to draw upon the additional arguments which he had in reserve in favour of his theory. Rose told him demurely that she had been thinking over all that he had previously said, and she had come to see how wise he was in this matter, as indeed he was in every other matter. She was quite content, she said, to walk from the church—if he thought it better

to drive of course she would drive—to their new home.

It was on the afternoon following the announcement of her decision on this point the conversation already recorded took place between Robert and his colleague Dick ; and it was on the next day Robert had an interview with Sir Ecroyd Fairleigh, the head of the department, in the course of which he thought it only respectful to inform the great man of his approaching marriage.

"Then you'll want a month off, I suppose?" said Sir Ecroyd.

"No, Sir Ecroyd," replied Robert. "My fiancée and I have come to the conclusion that a wedding tour is an absurdity. We intend to go direct from her father's house into our own little home."

"Oh, that's nonsense! Better take a month," said Sir Ecroyd.

"It's a matter of principle with us, Sir Ecroyd."

"Oh, principles be ——! that is —— Well my lad keep to your principles if you can ; but for my part I fancy that I'd prefer to go straight to the South of France if I got married in England towards the end of December. You'd much better take a month. I'll see that it doesn't count against you in the autumn."

Robert said that he appreciated the great kindness of Sir Ecroyd, but he had his principles.

"All right, take a week," said the chief. "It will take you quite a week getting your house into working order."

Robert accepted the compromise, and the result was that when the wedding took place, a few days before Christmas, he drove with his beloved Rose from her father's house to the neat little villa (semi-detached) which he had rented on the outskirts of Notting Hill.

Very cosy indeed the interior seemed. The little servant (everything in the house was to be on a small scale, Robert had decided) had made a fire in the dining-room and another in the drawing-room, and when the husband and wife entered both were burning quite briskly, the firelight and the lamplight mingled pleasantly and were reflected from the mirror on the mantel-piece to that over the sideboard at the other end of the dining-room.

Robert kissed his wife as she cried out, "How pretty!" on entering the dining-room.

"Now, my dearest, confess that I was right," he cried. "Confess that this is very much better than the Channel passage."

"It is the very house for us," said she. "I hope that dinner will soon be ready. I'm quite starving."

He was pleased to find her so practical; and it just occurred to him that he had never previously heard her confess to an appetite. There

had always been that suggestion of the ethereal about her, though her mother had more than once declared in his hearing that Rose was an excellent housekeeper.

But when the little maid—she was recommended as a capital cook—was interrogated on the subject of dinner she was forced to admit that the joint and the fish which Robert had thoughtfully ordered at the Stores the previous day had not yet arrived.

“Good gracious!” cried Rose, “this is a pretty piece of stupidity. How on earth could you order anything at the stores, expecting them to send it in good time?”

“They promised that the things should leave by the 9.15 delivery,” said Robert.

“Oh, you should have known what promises are at the Stores,” said she, almost, if not quite, testily. “What time did you come here?” she inquired of the little maid.

“It was a bit after two, m’m,” replied the maid.

“There, you see, they sent the things after all, but there was no one here to receive them,” cried Robert. “Why didn’t you come sooner? You should have been here at ten in the morning,” he said to the maid.

But the little maid had an excuse quite out of proportion to her size. It involved a consideration for the illness of a brother and the

necessity for appreciating the difficulties of a mother with what the maid called a "nipper."

"Oh, never mind. What's done can't be undone," said Robert. "I'll just run out and get some chops and a tomato or two. That will do us for the present."

He put on his hat and coat again and hurried out in search of a butcher's.

When he returned with his parcel he found the hall full of smoke. A terrible thought flashed through his mind: the house was on fire. He threw down the chops and rushed into the dining-room. He found his wife and the maid wrestling with what is called the "register" of the grate. It had, without a moment's warning, closed itself with a snap, and as it worked on a new principle, neither Rose nor the maid could make any impression on it, and the smoke meanwhile was flowing into the room and overflowing into the hall and making its way up the stairs.

Robert rushed manfully at the thing and succeeded in forcing it back, but not before he had singed his coatsleeve and broken the nail of one finger. As for his wife and the servant, they emerged from the coal-smoke in a deplorable condition of grime.

"Was there anything so provoking?" cried Rose, looking at her hands with all the horror of an actress of Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene, and in more tragic tones than any but the

most exceptional Lady Macbeth would think necessary to employ. "I've completely ruined my dress, and as for the curtains—just look at the tablecloth."

Robert did look at it. The flakes of soot impartially strewn over it gave it the aspect of an entirely new pattern worked out in black and white.

"Take it away and lay another," he said to the maid.

He ran up to the bath-room to wash his hands, Rose going to the kitchen; but while he was still under the influence of the hot-water tap he started, hearing a cry and a scuffle in the hall, and the next instant there bounded through the half-open door of the bath-room a mangy-looking white cat with the tag-end of a chump chop hanging limply from its jaws. It glared at him for an instant, and then fled precipitately through the lobby window, which he had opened to let out the smoke.

"How on earth did that brute get in?" Rose was enquiring, in no weak voice, in the hall. He had never heard her voice so loud before; in his judgment it lost something of its music through its loudness. But he was bound to admit that the vocal passages with which she was dealing could only be taken *forte*.

When his wife appeared breathless outside the bath-room holding up the paper in which the

chops had been wrapped, he made use of some expressions which are rarely susceptible of *pianissimo* treatment.

"Every scrap gone!" said Rose. "Some brute of a cat! That idiotic girl encouraged it here during the day—said it meant luck!"

"Oh, the idiot! Never mind, I'll run out again. I hope the butcher's will not be closed."

His hope was not realised in this respect. He thought of a nursery rhyme—at such moments do incongruous thoughts arise—

She went to the butcher's to get him a chop,
But when she got there they had closed up the shop.

His recollection of the verse was ominous; the shop *was* shut. What was he to do? Well, what he did was to go into a grocer's and buy a couple of pounds of ham and a Paysandu tongue.

He hurried back to the villa, half expecting some fresh catastrophe to await him. His wife was cheerful—comparatively cheerful—as she met him in the hall.

"You can have your choice—ham or tongue, my dear," said he, laying down his parcels. He took care not to leave them on the hall table, though it is not on record that the depredations of any except a lodging-house cat included a Paysandu tongue in its round tin.

"I'll take the tongue," said Rose. "It's not much of a dinner, to be sure; but I am so hungry."

But before one can enjoy a tinned comestible it is absolutely necessary to open the tin, and as yet no tin-opener had found its way into the villa. A hammer and a saw, and a dreadful implement known as a cleaver was forthcoming; also a poker of large calibre, but no tin-opener. On the whole a simple carving-knife proved—after everything else had been tried—the best substitute for the missing implement; but unfortunately, not being accustomed to the strokes of a hammer, the handle parted into chips. As a carving-knife the thing could never appear again, and Robert fervently hoped that it never would, as a tin-opener.

Rose was tearful at this new mishap. The knife and fork had been the gift of one of her school companions—one of those who had had honeymoon tours during the year. She was only indifferently comforted by a slice of the disintombed tongue.

On the whole they made a pretty fair dinner, not of course the *récherché* repast which Robert had led her to believe would await them, but one that had to be eked out with tea (slightly smoked) and bread and butter.

“Now, my dearest,” said Robert, when he and his wife had gone to the little drawing-room, “I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise!” she cried. “Do tell me what

it is ? Surprises are always nicest when you are prepared for them. What is it, dear ? ”

“ Pictures,” he cried triumphantly.

“ Pictures ! How delightful ! You know dear I couldn’t help feeling that the walls of both rooms were a little bare, but I only looked for pictures to come in the course of time.”

“ That is what would have been the case if we had been idiotic enough to go abroad instead of remaining cosily at home. Now I calculated that a fortnight’s tour abroad would cost at least fifty pounds, so having that sum to the good I invested in pictures at a saleroom one day when pictures were cheap. I knew how you loved them, and I said, ‘after we have dined in our house we’ll spend the evening hanging them ; it will keep my beloved from feeling lonely.’ ”

“ That was very sweet of you, Robert. I don’t feel a bit lonely somehow. Where are the pictures ? ”

“ I’ll get them in a moment.”

When he left the room Rose’s face was anything but radiant. She had studied painting, but she had long ago become aware of the fact that Robert’s taste in art left much to be desired. She brightened up however when he returned staggering under the weight of the frames which he carried on both shoulders. The pictures were both large and numerous, and an observation of this fact increased Rose’s dread.

He laid them down gently on the floor, leaning them against the edge of the sofa, and took a long breath.

"Thirteen of them in all. Pictures were cheap that day," said he. He shifted the standard lamp so that each might be seen to the best advantage, and then he began to display them with beaming face. But Rose's face did not beam when the first—it was entitled "A Woodland Scene"—met her gaze. It was the most lurid daub that had ever come before her eyes. The trees were clearly modelled on those that are supplied with a Noah's Ark, and the wild flowers were simply drops of paint of all colours—blue and crimson, and purple and magenta.

"That's a nice bright thing, isn't it?" he cried. "Now I like cheerful pictures in a house—none of your mournful things."

"Yes," said she, "it is—bright."

"Here's another," said he, bringing forward a canvas three feet by two feet six, in a heavy Dutch-metal frame, slightly damaged in transit. "'A View in Wales' that's the name. Look at that cataract!"

She did look at it, when she had found it, but the result was not pleasing.

"Isn't it bold?" said he.

"Bold? Oh yes, very bold," she replied.

He showed her the lot, and she found that he

had exhibited the first best. She felt ready to burst into tears.

"Now we'll hang them," said he.

"Hang them?" she repeated, fortunately not in an explanatory tone, though such a tone would have been appropriate to her feelings at that moment.

"Yes. I have decided that these two landscapes will go well on each side of the fireplace," said he, indicating a pair of aniline dyed masterpieces.

"Oh no, Robert; they wouldn't go with the paper," she protested. She thought of the long days she would have to spend in that room facing those landscape libels.

"Paper! what does it matter about the paper?" he cried.

"It matters everything," said she. "Good gracious! those things would look frightful in this room!"

"Well these"—he indicated another pair—"Newlyn by Moonlight," and "Early Morning—Linton, North Devon."

"Those would be even worse," said she. "Do you know, Robert, I think that this room looks very well without pictures."

"Oh, nonsense! What did I buy them for?" he cried.

"Don't you think that they would go well with the paper in the spare bedroom?" she asked.

"The spare——! Don't be a fool, Rose!"

"I don't intend. That's why I won't have any of those things here. What would people say if they came into the room suddenly and found themselves face to face with that, and that?"

"Of course they're not masterpieces, but they were very cheap. If you want pictures by Millais and Leighton, and the other chap—what's his name—Whistler, you should have married a millionaire. At any rate, these will have to serve us, not being millionaires. I'll show you how well they'll look."

She pouted for a moment. Then as he calmly proceeded to hammer in a nail at the side of the fireplace she turned to him. She was compelled to speak loud to be heard above the sound of the hammer.

"If you hang up one of those horrible things in my drawing-room I'll take it down and throw it out of the window," she cried—her voice was a trifle shrill.

"I'll hang it up and I'll take care that you don't throw it out of the window," said he. "Without joking, Rose," he continued, "I must say that I consider you to be most unreasonable. If people can't afford to buy first class pictures they must put up with second class."

"We don't want any at all," said she. "Take them away; they make me ill."

"Ill—ill ! Nothing could be brighter than some of them. They give the room the air of a cheerful home."

"They're odious—vulgar——"

"Well you'll have to put up with them."

"I'll not put up with them."

"You will. You must remember, Rose, that the husband is the head——"

"Oh, don't begin to preach to me. Those things get on my nerves."

He looked at her for a moment, and then, with the discrimination of a connoisseur, he selected a sample of aniline dyes and proceeded to scrape the wall with it in endeavouring to catch its cord upon the nail. When at last his efforts were crowned with success, and the thing hung in all its horror on the wall, he cried, "There now !"

She gave a cry, looked at him, and then walked quietly out of the room, and upstairs. He heard her close the door and lock it.

He flung himself down in a chair and stared into the fire.

She would return to the room after a space—he felt certain of that. He had often heard of the sulky young wife and the way to treat her. She would return to his side in tears—penitent—he would then say a few words to her regarding the authority of a husband—he could not begin too soon.

But when an hour had passed and she had not returned, he began to feel uneasy. When eleven o'clock came he felt that his life was wrecked. He put on his overcoat and hat and walked aimlessly along the road. He got into High Street and turned down Silver Street and across into South Kensington. It was midnight when he found himself outside the rooms of Dick Carver. He saw that there was a light in Dick's sitting-room and he tapped on the window. Dick came to the window and looked out; in another moment the hall door was opened.

"Great Scot!" cried Mr. Carver, "what brings you here?"

"I want you to help me, Dick, old man," said Robert.

"Come in and tell me what you want," said Dick.

They went in together. The whisky bottle was on the table. Dick poured some of the contents into a tumbler and handed it to his visitor, but Robert only shook his head.

"What have you to say for yourself?" asked Dick.

"Not much—only that my life is wrecked, ruined irretrievably."

"Nonsense!"

"It's the truth. I want you, my friend, to do me the favour to explain all to the chief to-morrow. I'm going to Liverpool by the early

train : I'll just be in time for a Cunarder bound for New York."

"Skittles !"

"Perhaps in a new country I may forget
——"

"Tell me what has happened ?"

After a pause Robert told him, and Dick was unfeeling enough to laugh.

"Well, this is where your theories about a honeymoon have landed you !" he said. "You've made a pretty ass of yourself. What the mischief made you buy that set of daubs ? and why the mischief did you spring them on a poor girl whose nerves were over-strung by all that she had gone through during the day ? Can't you see the philosophy there's in a honeymoon tour ? The husband and wife can't quarrel at a hotel in a strange place ; the woman can't run back to her mother at a moment's notice, and the man can't run to the rooms of his chum when his wife puts her chin up an inch or two higher than usual. There they are, bound together for a week or two to make the best of each other, and they usually do. This is the result of your experiment."

"I mean't it to be—— Oh, that confounded chimney smoking did it all ! What am I to do, Dick ? Do you see any hope for me ?"

"Hope ! Get to bed as soon as possible. I'll talk to you in the morning."

He took him up to the bedroom which he had frequently occupied, and said a laconic "good-night." But some hours had passed before Robert fell asleep. Dick called him about seven, and they breakfasted together at half past that hour.

"You have money—twenty pounds?" Dick asked him.

"Thirty."

"Good."

He whistled for a hansom, and in twenty minutes they were at Victoria.

"Take two first-class returns to Paris, and wait at the train until I come to you," said Dick.

Robert obeyed him mechanically. He was as submissive as a child—a good deal more so than some children. He went into the waiting-room, for the train was not to start for an hour, and passed his time wondering what Dick meant to do.

At five minutes before the time of the departure of the train he walked down the platform and stood at the door of a first-class carriage.

He had been standing there for just three minutes when there passed him on a truck a portmanteau, which he recognised as his own, on the top of quite a heap of luggage—bonnet boxes, a Saratoga trunk, and a few other trifles.

He was about to follow the porter to demand

a solution of this mystery when his arms were grasped from behind.

"Help your wife into the carriage, Robert ; there's no time to lose," said Dick.

"O Robert, dear Robert ! we've both been so foolish !" said Rose.

"But you'll never do so any more. Now in with you both, and a merry Christmas to you, and mind you don't quarrel on the way to Paris," laughed Dick.

"O Mr. Carver, how can you suggest such a thing ? As if any two people ever quarrelled on the way to Paris !" cried Rose.

In another minute the train was clear of the terminus, and the husband and wife were in each other's arms.

They spent a delightful Christmas at Nice, looking out upon the sparkling blue waters of the Mediterranean.

SALLY.

SALLY.

SOME parcels has come from Briggs, sir," said Jervis, from the door of the room where his master, the Honourable Gerald Graythorpe, was enjoying an after-dinner cigar.

"All right, Jervis ; lay the things out, and let me know when Mr. Ashby calls," said Gerald.

"Very good, sir."

The servant went noiselessly away, and his master resumed his study of the lighted end of his cigar. The evening paper, which he had been trying to convince himself he had been reading, lay in a most inelegant sprawl upon the floor.

"The die is cast !" muttered the sole occupant of that room in St. James's Street. "The die is cast ! Like the distinguished monarch, Nebuchadnezzar, I am about to go forth from the dwellings of civilised people and mingle with the

beasts of the field. Well, I don't suppose it will do me any more harm than it did Nebuchadnezzar—according to the most authentic accounts of that business of his it did him a considerable amount of good. I'll be quite content if I get out of my little affair so satisfactorily. Now what the mischief can be keeping Charlie? I said eight-thirty for a dress rehearsal, and now it's nine."

He put his cigar between his lips once more, and, after a few earnest puffs, picked up the paper and alternately puffed and yawned down one of the pages; it contained a review of two books—the sort of thing that everyone yawns over. After another quarter of an hour had passed he flung away the paper with one hand and the end of the cigar with the other, crying:

"Confound that fellow! he's always late. I'll not wait for him; I'll have a dress rehearsal on my own account."

He went to his bedroom on the upper floor, and turned on the electric light. His servant was in the dressing-room in a moment.

"Briggs has made a queer mistake, sir," said he, pointing to where sundry articles of clothing were lying on the mahogany stand. "He's been and sent you a complete suit of rough corduroys, sir—a regular groom's suit, it looks like. Some fool of a shopman must have shifted the labels of your parcels on to this when they were wait-

ing to be sent off. Shall I pack 'em up again, sir?"

"Don't be at so much trouble, Jervis," said Mr. Graythorpe. "You're behind the times. Haven't you heard that this is the very latest style?"

"Lor' no, sir," replied Jervis. "Latest style, sir? Why, these is what a dandified groom might wear."

"And you haven't had your eyes open for the past five years, Jervis? Haven't you noticed that your dandified groom is the ideal that we've all had before us so far as dress is concerned? Oh, yes; we hope to catch him up some of these days, so far as his ordinary clothes are concerned. Of course, it would be too much to expect to get all at once into his trick of tying his scarf; but that will come in time, I daresay. We must be patient. Rome wasn't built in a day. No, you needn't wait. I think I'd like to try these on without assistance; I must get accustomed to doing something for myself."

"Very good, sir," said Jervis, without moving a muscle. He went to the door, then glanced back at the corduroys, wheeled, and made a rapid exit. He had reached the ground floor before he burst into a laugh with his hand over his mouth. He did not think it safe to let himself free sooner.

"Some more larks he's hup to," murmured Jervis; and from this form of expression, it

might not be too much to assume that he had, in days gone by, become aware of some other larks on the part of his master.

But when Jervis had disappeared Gerald began to examine with some degree of earnestness the garments which lay neatly folded on the stand. Corduroy was the very durable material of which the suit was composed—a coarse gray cloth, very similar to that which seems to find favour with under grooms who have aspirations if not aspirations. He examined each article, including the neat leggings, and then gave a laugh. As he took off the smoking coat which he was wearing, and substituted for it the corduroy jacket, he laughed again, surveying himself in the mirror. He did not seem at all ill-pleased at the result of the change, and soon he had adopted the other articles of the suit in place of those which he was wearing, even fixing on the made-up scarf—blue, with large white spots, and a horse-shoe pin—and buttoning on the leggings.

He had scarcely completed his toilet when the sound of the latest burlesque song, whistled with taste and feeling, came from the stairs. with the obligato of a man's tramp. Gerald threw open the door of his dressing-room and jerked one finger towards his forehead, as a tall, good-looking youth appeared in the lobby, and cried :

“Hallo ! Already ?”

“I beg your pardon, sir ; are you looking for

Mr. Graythorpe?" said Gerald. "Very sorry, sir, but e's gone 'hout, sir. Any message, sir, written or oral, I'll put into 'is 'and, sir?"

"Bravo!" cried the other—his name was Charlie Ashby, and he held a commission in the Household Cavalry. "Bravo! you look very little inferior to a low type of stableman out for a 'oliday."

"Your flattery is cloying," said Gerald. "You think I'll do?"

"Come into the light until I get a good look at you," said Charlie, leading him back to the dressing-room, and into the full blaze of the electric light. After turning him about, and examining him critically, Charlie shook his head. "Nothing like it, my hearty," he said. "You'd have no chance in that rig out."

"Hang it all, wasn't it you who suggested the rig out?" cried Gerald. "Weren't you cocksure of the costume of the respectable donkey-chair boys of Nethercombe?"

"Yes; but they don't as a rule have their costumes built by Briggs, of Saville Row," said Charlie. "My dear boy, you should have gone to the East End for your corduroys, and have bought them there second hand."

"I believe I'd go even that length," said Gerald. "But I'd rather not, if it would be possible to avoid it."

"If you're in earnest, you'd shrink at nothing,"

said Charlie, earnestly. "Never mind ; perhaps these togs will do after all. But you look so confoundedly like a gentleman."

"I'm very sorry," murmured Gerald. "It's my misfortune rather than my fault. I'm not to blame."

"I don't say that you are, only—take off that coat for goodness' sake."

Gerald meekly obeyed, and Charlie grasped the well-cut garment, and rolling it up into the compass of an Association football, took a drop kick at it, and sent it into the grate. Then he picked it up, and sent it flying into a corner of the room. For about five minutes he made some excellent practice with the improvised football. He was clearly in good football form. Gerald watched him with but a languid measure of interest. Few men would be inclined to be so pathetic when an athlete was subjecting their newly-made garment to such vigorous treatment.

"It's very kind of you to take all that trouble on my account," he said, while his friend was breathing hard as he untied the knots of the sleeves that bound the coat together into the compact form of a football.

"Don't mention it," replied Charlie. "If I'm to stage-manage this little business I'll see that it's done properly. There now—that's nearer the sort of coat that you must wear, if you wish to succeed."

He threw him the coat. It had aged considerably during the past five minutes—the most active five minutes it would be likely to have, however chequered a future might be in store for it. It had now the appearance of a garment that had been worn by a not over-careful man for half a dozen years.

“Thank you. Am I expected to put it on?” said Gerald, lifting it on the point of one foot.

“Certainly, if you have still a mind to carry out your notion of a disguise” replied Charlie. “Yes; the unmistakable look of Briggs and Company has now been knocked out of it; all that you’ll have to do now is to shave off that moustache of yours, rumple your hair a bit, buy a small cap, and keep from washing for a week or so, and you’ll pass muster. I’ll guarantee that if the mater was as long-sighted as she now is short-sighted, she’d fail to identify you.”

“Oh, you’re sure that’s all you’d recommend me to do? You know you’ve only to suggest something else, and I’ll see that it’s done. Think now if you haven’t forgotten something—a chap’s memory is apt to be treacherous in regard to such trifles as—ah, shaving off a moustache, I think you said. You wouldn’t recommend me to shave my head, would you. You’ve only to say it, you know.”

Charlie laughed.

"No ; I wouldn't recommend you to shave your head—only rumple it, and keep it in a constant state of rumple," said he. "Yes, and it would be no harm if you were to drop your cap accidentally at Regent Circus and see that half a dozen 'buses pass over it. It will then be fit for use. Now, give me a brandy and soda ; my exertions on your behalf have made me a bit rocky. Ah, Gerry, old chap ; it's not many friends that would take so much trouble to help you."

"No," said Gerald ; "I'll be hanged if there's another that would make a football of a new coat of mine for several minutes, and then suggest the advisability of my shaving off a moustache that has been my most intimate companion for the past five years. Never mind, I'll stick at nothing : the moustache will go in the morning. Let me pass another evening in its company. Don't be too hard-hearted."

"I wish you'd chuck up the whole business and keep your moustache," said Charlie, as they went downstairs. "I know that I'm getting myself into the deuce of a row with my people on your account ; and, upon my soul, Flossie isn't worth all this bother, I know her and have known her rather intimately for the past nineteen years, and I can assure you that she's just as worldly as they are made."

Gerald smiled—the smile of the lover who

hears the young woman of his choice referred to in the brutal language of a brother.

"Will you have brandy or whisky?" he enquired.

"I think after all I'll have whisky—Irish," said Charlie.

Gerald turned the soda-water syphon into the tall tumbler containing a glass of Irish whisky and handed the result of the blend to his friend.

It is to be hoped that every one knows Nethercombe, that most delightful of Devonshire resorts—when not too many holiday-seekers make it the centre of their explorations. But as in England, the entire population take their annual holiday in the month of August, one has only to avoid Nethercombe during this month in order to drink its delights to the full, and to run no chance of meeting at every lovely spot the "star comique" who makes three clear and well-defined toilets in the course of the day, and sings intolerably dreary songs in the pavilion every night for the benefit of the August visitors.

One of the charms of the place is to be found in the undulating character of the roads, whether along the cliffs or further inland. At Nethercombe, if one moves at all, one is either going uphill or downhill. Now to the young and active these hill-walks are altogether delightful,

but the elderly and inactive regard them at first with gradually lengthening faces until someone who has been there before says :

“ Oh, we shall have donkey-chairs.”

Then the faces that were lengthening become suddenly curtailed, and the owners of these faces lift their eyes to the hills without misgiving. Hills, they believe, were made for donkeys, and donkeys were made for hills by a wonderful provision of nature, and so all's well.

The donkey-chairs at Nethercombe are numerous and mostly these equipages are well appointed. The animals are led by elderly women, by elderly men, and by such young men as do not consider that the guiding of a donkey is an employment unworthy of a man with fully-developed muscles. It is not on record that a donkey ever jeopardised the safety of a passenger by running away.

Just a week after Lieutenant Ashby of the Blues had partaken of that simple and popular refreshment in the rooms of his friend the Honourable Gerald Gaythorpe. the ranks of the donkey-chair drivers at a certain part of the little town were augmented by a youth with a handsome, clean-shaven face, and here and there a smut upon it as if he had not had too much time to spend at his toilet. His suit of corduroys was considerably the worse for wear, and his cap was undeniably bad, as was also the tie that he

wore. His boots of untanned leather had passed the first bloom of youth. The new-comer was, in fact, as like a well-set-up donkey-chair driver as might be seen anywhere along the coast.

He appeared with a neat little carriage and a well-groomed donkey quite suddenly one morning, greatly to the annoyance of the other occupants of the same rank—that is to say, the same donkey-chair rank. He was plainly a stranger, and it was—with some reason—asserted by the drivers who were native-born, that for a stranger to come and try and take the bread out of their mouths was a great hardship. The old women were most vehement in their protests, and many of them reached the ears of the new comer, who was leaning against a lamp, flicking the dust off his boots with the whip that he carried.

“Don’t you mind ’em, young man,” said a voice at his elbow in the most melodious Devonshire, just as he was beginning to weary of the strong language that was being directed against him. “Don’t you mind ’em. It’s a free country; there’s room for all. It’s not a bad donkey, that of yours.”

The new comer turned round and saw beside him a young girl with the pleasantest brown face that he had ever seen. It was—yes, he could not but acknowledge it—a handsome face. She was tall and beautifully made, he also saw,

although the dress of a donkey-chair girl was not calculated to show her figure to any particular advantage.

"It's very good of you to say so," said he, with a smile. "Still, you know, there's something in what those old ladies say : I'm a sort of interloper—in fact, a regular interloper, amn't I ?"

"You don't look as if you'd been brought up to the business, sir," said she ; her eyes were now turned upon the ground.

"No ; I wasn't. But for that matter, I don't suppose that anyone is born a donkey-chair driver," he remarked.

"I wasn't," she said. "My mother didn't always drive a chair, sir."

"Why do you call me, 'sir' ?" he inquired. "Do you call the other boys, 'sir' ?"

"I've seen too many folks about here not to know the difference between a donkey-chair boy and a gentleman," she said, still looking down.

"Is your name Johnson ?" came an interrupting voice—the voice of the hall page of the chief hotel of Nethercombe.

"I answer to the name Johnson," said the new donkey-driver.

"Come along then ; you're the chap that someone recommended to two of our ladies. Look sharp now, stupid."

"You infernal young—ah, all right; I'll look sharp."

The donkey-driver looked at first as if he was about to give the hotel page such a thrashing as he had never received in his life, but he suddenly checked himself, and went to his donkey's head. Then he turned to the girl, saying,

"I beg your pardon; but business is business, isn't it? We'll meet again, I hope."

"It's quite likely," said she.

He did his best to encourage his animal into a trot, but his success was not pronounced. He turned his head after a moment or two, and saw that the girl was leaning against the lamp watching him. He nodded to her, and raised his whip in a coachman's salute.

"Look here, my boy," he said to the page who was whistling one of the melodies that the last "star comique" had left behind him—the month was September, and the "star comique" had departed. "Look here, what's the name of that girl?"

"Gerlong with you; I ain't a fool quite," said the boy. "As if everybody doesn't know Sally."

"Sally what?"

"No, not Sally Watt. She hasn't got no other name but Sally. Donkey girls don't need more nor one name. Hurry up. Mind you charge 'em plenty; they're swells—not the

August swells, mind you, the genuine article—five bobbers, not 'arf crowners. Mind, I get my sixpence."

They reached the hotel.

"The chair for Mrs. Ashby is here," cried the page, and from a seat in the hall two ladies arose—the one a middle-aged lady of aristocratic features, the other a very pretty young woman of precisely the same type on a reduced scale, and a good deal paler.

"I'm really quite as well able to walk as you, mamma," said the girl, as they went together.

"You may feel so, Maud, but you know what Dr. Hartford said; you must on no account overtax your strength," said the elderly lady. "You are still weak. Oh, that's the chair. It seems clean. Is it clean, my man?"

"Quite clean, my lady," came the somewhat throaty voice of the driver, who stood at the donkey's head, as if he fancied this precaution was needed to prevent the spirited animal from running away.

The young girl got into the chair, the page closing the apron.

"We don't want to go fast," said Mrs. Ashby.

The man touched his cap, and the donkey was induced to move ahead. It had certainly heard the ladyship's injunction, and was smiling blandly. It would take precious good care to

carry out that injunction to the letter, whatever its driver might try to do.

Its driver walked in a rather slouching way by its head. The elder lady walked by the side of the chair in which her daughter was seated, and both admired the expanse of sea that came into view when the cliff path had been ascended. The lady who was on foot went along bravely. She had no difficulty in keeping pace with the vehicle in which her daughter was lying back under her sunshade. But when a seat near the summit was reached Mrs. Ashby trudged no further.

"I don't intend to weary myself," she said. "There is no need for me to go any further with you. I'll keep you in sight while you go on. You must get all the fresh air possible, Dr. Hartford said."

Before she had quite spoken, the chair was in motion once more. It went on for about a hundred yards, and then the driver carefully led the donkey round by a heather-clad rock that partly concealed the vehicle. Then he stopped, and came beside the girl, saying—

"How does my beloved feel?"

She gave an involuntary cry, and her face was certainly no longer pale.

"What on earth——" she exclaimed.

"Hush, my dearest," said Gerald. "Only tell me how you are?"

"What masquerading nonsense is this?" said

she. "Oh, Gerald, you have been a great fool. Ah, this is what Charlie was hinting at when he told me to be sure and take plenty of driving exercise in the chairs. Great heavens! you have taken off your moustache!"

"Of course I have," said he. "Did you not think that my love was equal to that?"

"Love? O, Gerald, how could you be so foolish? If mamma finds you out she'll think that I'm in the plot too."

"She'll not find me out. What was I to do, Maud, when she wouldn't let me come to the house any more? I was hungering and thirsting to see you, my dearest, and I made up my mind I'd come here in this capacity to have a chance of being near you. I was afraid that you were going to die."

"You've been a great fool, and I can't say that I think your present costume a great success."

"Ah, you're changed since you were ill."

"I don't think that I am. Haven't I often told you that it was nonsense to think of our being engaged to one another. We haven't a penny between us, and there are three lives between you and the title."

"I've a thousand a year of my own."

"A thousand a year! Oh, please drive on that foolish brute of yours. I suppose we must keep up the deception. Oh, Gerald, you do look so

funny ! I will say this—you are completely disguised.”

“ I’ll not give you up. Perhaps now that you’re weak you may look at matters differently from the way you did, but——”

“ You’re very foolish. Do please drive on.”

He drove on to the head of the cliff. She admired the view and talked about it. He turned his back upon it, and was silent. She laughed.

“ We’ll have that nice chair again to-morrow ; I’m sure its clean,” said Mrs. Ashby to her daughter that evening.

They had it again the next day ; but Gerald had not the privilege of a chat alone with the girl for whose sake he had disguised himself and was suffering hourly humiliations, for in order to allay all suspicion he took his place daily in the rank of donkey-chairs, and even earned half-a-crown—the first coin he had ever earned. Then came a wet day, and he found himself standing by the side of his friend Sally in the shelter of a brick wall for about four hours. No one seemed inclined for a drive in a donkey-chair ; but Gerald, after the first half-hour, did not complain. He could not but admit that he was infinitely more entertained by the side of the handsome girl with whom he was sheltering than he would have been had he been lucky enough to secure a furtive quarter of an hour

with Maud Ashby. The freshness and the unconventionality of Sally's chat—her never-ending cheerfulness—her pleasant humour, and above all—for Gerald Graythorpe was only a man—the charm of her face and her figure attracted him as he had rarely been attracted to any girl. Sally was an undoubted novelty to him. He had had plentiful experience of the maidens of Mayfair, but he had never before met a thoroughly natural girl to talk to. She told him all that there was to be told of her simple life—how her father had been the master and owner of a small coasting brig that had foundered with all hands within sight of shore when Sally was only fifteen years old—how her mother had been ill for over a year, and how, with the few pounds that remained after the loss of her father and his ship, she had bought a donkey-chair, and had contrived to keep the whole family out of her earnings and to save enough to invest in another equipage which her mother now controlled.

All this interested Gerald greatly, and he was quite sorry when a fine hour arrived and his companion had to drive off to keep an appointment with an invalid lady who had engaged her for a daily trip to the cliffs. Gerald found himself without an engagement for the rest of the evening, but he had passed a pleasanter day by the side of Sally than he could have by the side of Maud. He felt somewhat humiliated by this

reflection; for had he not been in love with Maud for close upon six months? and the idea of having fallen in love with Sally was, of course, too ridiculous to be considered for a moment.

But all the same he felt himself longing to be once again by the side of that fresh girl who had made the day seem so short to him.

There was no disguising the look of pleasure that appeared upon Sally's face when they met the next day; and when the hotel page came up to hire him for the Ashbys, he actually said "Confound them!" but then he remembered that it was on account of the love that he bore Maud Ashby he was masquerading, and he made haste to attend the summons.

He had only a few minutes chat with her this day.

"No, no," she said, "you must not take my hand, somebody may be watching us. Oh, I do not profess to be romantic, and I cannot see much fun in this sort of thing. It can lead to nothing; it will not put money into your pocket."

"Only an odd half-crown."

"Oh, you have been a great fool, Gerald. I told you so long ago. Perhaps I was wrong not to tell you at once that I had accepted mamma's decree, but I really thought that what she said when you talked to her would have been enough for you. Now, take me back to her."

"Ah, your illness has changed you," he said.

"But when you get strong again you will be your own self once more, and you will love me as you did."

"Oh, drive me back," she cried, impatiently.

He drove her back, and hurried to where the line of chairs awaited "fares." Sally was there, and he found himself consoled for Maud's cruelty.

Three days passed without his being enquired for at the hotel, and on the fourth day he got a letter from Charlie Ashby.

"The Mater and Maud are home again," Charlie wrote, "and I had a bad quarter of an hour with M., for the part I played in your business. Chuck up the donkey, old boy. M. has just engaged herself to marry Tommy Morshead. I knew she couldn't resist the title and the broad acres. I'm sorry for you—no, on second thoughts, I'm not. I told you all along that she wasn't the girl for you."

Gerald got the letter before he left his humble lodgings. He did not even swear. He went out in search of Sally, and he found her returning by the side of her empty chair down one of the villa-crowned heights. She had driven home one of the ladies who had been shopping in the little town.

"Sally," he said, "I'm going away."

She looked at him without a word, after her first little start—he noticed it—was over.

"Yes ; I've been an impostor—but I'm—yes, I'm sorry that I'm going—infernally sorry. I—yes, I like you, Sally ; you're a good girl. I'm going because I like you. I want you to take charge of my donkey and chair until I come to claim them. You told me that your young brother was a good driver. Good-bye, Sally."

"I don't want the donkey and chair," she said. "But I'll keep them for you, and—oh, you'll come back—you must come back."

"You may be sure that I'll not forget you, at any rate," said he. "Good-bye."

She gave him her hand when he held out his. He could not see that her eyes were full of tears.

"You'll come back—you'll come back," she faltered. "Yes, I'll look out for you every day."

"Good-bye," said he.

He turned about, and hurried up the hill. He could not trust himself to stay beside her for another moment. When he paused, breathless, half way up the hill he looked round. She was standing with her face against the shaggy neck of her donkey.

He took the next train to London. He never came back.

That was the end of Sally's love story.

That was the end of Gerald Graythorpe's love story.

THE WAITS OF
TARAGONDA CREEK.

THE WAITS OF TARAGONDA CREEK.

AT last !” cried Archie Moreton, rising in his stirrups, and pointing his riding-whip in the direction of the blue gums that surrounded the homestead at Taragonda Creek, New South Wales.

“At last !” echoed Tom Barton, his fellow-traveller. “It’s not much of a shanty, but I’d rather see it before me than Buckingham Palace at the present moment.”

“Oh, merely Buckingham Palace ? Why not say Holloway Gaol when you’re about it ; or the Hotel Métropole ?” laughed Archie.

“I said Buckingham Palace because, I suppose, if two casual sundowners like ourselves were to ride up to the gates some evening, they wouldn’t

open to receive them—at least, not with the same alacrity as will be shown by the gates of that mansion among the blue gums.”

“Ah! I see what your idea was. It would not have done at all to substitute Holloway Gaol or the Métropole, both of which are the souls of hospitality. What did you say was the name of our host at—now what’s the name of the station?”

“Taragonda Creek.”

“Of course; Taragonda Creek. But what’s the name of our host?”

“Let me see—what did Eric Maude say his name was?”

“Smith or Jones, or something to that effect.”

“I’ll have to search out his letter of introduction.”

“Oh, don’t mind. Let us push on to the shanty, or I’ll drop with thirst.”

“Hang it all, Archie, we can’t go on to the homestead and walk in coolly, without getting the man’s name well into our heads. It’s only in Australia that it would seem quite the natural thing to do, to ride up to the house of a man whose name you don’t know, and tell him that you intend staying with him for a month or two. Here’s his name—Brown—Hugh Brown.”

Tom had fished out of a pocket the letter of introduction which his friend, Eric Maude, had given him at Sydney the week before, assuring

him that, he had only to present it to the proprietor of the great sheep station at Taragonda Creek to make his cordial reception a certainty.

"I knew the name was something in the Smith line," said Archie. "Brown—Hugh Brown. Well, Mr. Brown, we'll be delighted to make your acquaintance, and to give you an expert's opinion of your cellar, likewise of your beefs and muttons. Push on, Tom."

They pushed on, their little horses responding with the true pluck of Australians to their urging, although they had passed over thirty miles of rather uneven bush track since morning, and had just climbed up the somewhat steep gully, from the head of which the homestead of Hugh Brown's station, known as Taragonda Creek, was visible through its avenues of blue gums, the station buildings—the shearing and wool sheds—being about a mile beyond the line of trees.

The two men were travelling companions in a tour round the world. They had gone from England to South America, and, after staying some months in Brazil, had crossed the continent to one of the west coast ports. Thence they had shipped for the Fiji Islands, and, after visiting that particular group, they had yielded to the fascinations of the South Seas and the coast scenery of New Zealand, before going on to Australia. They had numerous friends at Sydney, and to all of them they declared that the harbour

was the finest in the world—no one need hope to have a pleasant hour at Sydney who admits ever having seen a lovelier harbour. They had not, however, travelled all the way from England for the sake of sailing day after day around that lovely harbour, and they found Sydney quite too like an ordinary English town to be altogether satisfying to them. It was there that their friend, Eric Maude, had advised them to pay a visit to a characteristic bush station, and had given them the note of introduction to Mr. Hugh Brown, of Taragonda Creek.

And Mr. Hugh Brown was the handsome man, with the tanned face and big moustache—he did not wear the usual bush beard—who galloped across the splendid pasturage to meet the two strangers, while they were still half a mile off.

He gave them a genuine bush greeting, not waiting to receive the letter of introduction which they carried.

“We’ll be delighted to have you with us for a month or two,” he cried. “Oh, yes, you must stay for three months, at least, if you want to learn something about bush life. Maude mentioned to me that you would probably write a book when you returned. Well, you can’t do that, you know, unless you have been three months at a station. That’s the minimum time allowed to anyone who wishes to tell the world all about Australia. You can’t thoroughly know

your Australia in a shorter space of time. Which of you is Mr. Moreton?" he added, before either of the men could disclaim any intention of writing a line about their travels.

"I am that one," said Archie.

"My wife fancies she must have met you long ago," said Mr. Brown.

"This is my first visit to Australia," said Archie.

"And when she came out to marry me two years ago, it was her first visit also," laughed Mr. Brown. "Oh, yes, I tossed her over the letter I got from Eric a few days ago about your visit, and she remarked, casually, that she had a distinct recollection of meeting a Mr. Moreton some years ago. However, you'll know in a minute if her memory deceives her, or if you're another Moreton; though Moretons aren't as plentiful as Smiths, or, let us say, Browns. Oh, no, you'll be permitted to have your tubs before facing the womankind."

"The portmanteaus," said Tom.

"They arrived all right. You were quite right not to travel with them by train."

"We wished to experience the sensations of the sundowner," said Archie.

"And I trust you are successful. The sundowner has invariably a large appetite laid on," said Brown. "Here we are now," he added as he got upon the avenue of trees that had been

spared in the general clearing. "I think our best plan is to ride straight for our tub. It's at the side of the shanty, among the trees. Your clean linen will be there—mine also. I need it after a long day in the shearing-shed."

A couple of the station hands appeared at this moment, and hurried forward to take charge of the horses. Turning aside then from the broad avenue, the three men strolled through a plantation of loquat trees, and in a few minutes, to the surprise of two of them, came upon a small lake of crystal water. A bathing-shed stood on the left bank.

"Oh, the delight of it!" cried Tom. "And this is the tub you spoke of, Mr. Brown?"

"I think it will accommodate the three of us," said Mr. Brown.

They had plunged into the cool waters in another minute, and were wallowing in its depths, laughing in the joy of feeling its ripples upon their dusty bodies. Then they dressed in the bathing-shed in the fresh clothes that they had forwarded by train and waggon from Sydney to Taragonda.

"Supper—we call it supper here—will be ready in ten minutes," said Mr. Brown. "That time will, I hope, be sufficient for you and my wife to make up your minds if you have met before, Mr. Moreton."

It was.

"Great heavens !" cried Archie Moreton, when he found himself face to face with the tall, graceful lady whom his host introduced as his wife.

She was more self-possessed.

"I wondered if you were the same Mr. Moreton whom I used to know at Brackenhurst," said she advancing with a quiet smile. Her voice was thoroughly under command.

He took her hand mechanically, and kept his eyes fixed upon her face. Then he recovered his self-possession also. He gave a laugh as he cried :

"Great heavens ! I never thought—but, of course, I should have remembered that you—oh, no ; you are not in the least changed, Mrs.—Mrs. Brown. It was at Ellerton Court we first met, was it not ?"

"Now, don't either of you say that the world is a very small place, after all," said the husband.

"The world is a pretty good size still, though the facilities of getting about on its surface have lately been so increased as to give old friends a better chance of meeting. Now then, Lottie, will you lead us to the dining-room, and you and Mr. Moreton can exchange ideas regarding the past, while Mr. Burton and I discuss the future of England, of the Australian Colonies, and of wool."

After some absorbing minutes—for the supper was an excellent one, and Mr. Brown and Tom

Burton were quite ravenous—the party became a very merry one. Archie, at first silent, joined his friend in describing some of the ludicrous mistakes they had made—fancying that a damper was a sort of Australian drink—on entering the bush. He talked loudly, and laughed loudly now and again, and he certainly never exchanged any confidential reminiscences with the wife of his host.

When the three men, however, sat with their cigars and coffee on the low cane chairs out on the verandah, Archie was silent. The moon had risen above the line of trees that surrounded the homestead, and was throwing dark shadows across the little lawn that was still green, though the month was December, and the Australian summer was at its height. Hugh Brown and Tom chatted together on various topics ; and then, scarcely noticed by them, but causing Archie to be thrilled through and through with delight that was half an agony, came the music of a piano from the room behind them. Only one melody was played. Then came silence, then a movement at one of the windows leading on to the verandah. Archie looked round. There she stood, pale and lovely in the moonlight.

Did she hear the words that sprang to his lips ?

She may have done so. The others on the cane chairs were talking rapidly together on the

future of the Irrigation Colonies — a large question.

"I think I will say good-night," said she, stepping out on the verandah. "You have all had a trying day, and will want to get early to bed."

"What, will you go before you have had that long chat with Mr. Moreton, which I know you have been promising yourself?" cried the husband. "I'm sure you will want to know the fate of several friends whom you had in common. Oh, you must have that long chat."

"I hope you will not so absorb Mr. Moreton's attention during the three or four months he remains with us as to make a long chat with any one else impossible," said she. "Good-night, Mr. Burton ; good-night, Mr. Moreton. Oh, we shall have a long chat, but not to-night."

In another hour the two guests were sitting face to face in their bedroom. Both were grave.

"Your best plan is to get away from here with as little delay as possible, old man," said Tom, when his friend had said a few words to him.

"P'chut ! why should I run away ? laughed Archie.

"For two reasons—first, because you still love that woman who threw you over in the days when you hadn't a shilling to bless yourself with, and who, being an obedient child, married

our host that had ; and, secondly, because she still loves you."

"What rot you do talk—you couldn't talk greater rot if you were a professor of philosophy! Oh, no ; we have both got over that tender passage in our lives, Tom. Hang it all, man, we are a modern man and woman looking things straight in the face, not the sentimental phantoms of an English novel of the forties."

"You are a man, she is a woman—and love is love."

"And an ass is a donkey, and a donkey is an ass—and a philosopher is both. Don't be a philosopher, Tom, old chap. I'm all right. She is all right, and love is—well, good old love is buried, and on its tomb no *Resurgam* is written—good-night."

"You'll clear off, Archie.

"I'll stay."

"Don't be a fool. Brown is the best fellow alive."

"I believe that ; and that's why I won't have his hospitable soul vexed unto death by my sudden departure. Man, can't you see that my flight, without any explanation, would cause his suspicions to be aroused, and perhaps ruin his chance of happiness for the rest of his life ? She has clearly never told him about that little incident in her past with which I was closely associated. Then, for God's sake—for her sake

—for his sake don't let us do anything that may possibly change his condition of blissful ignorance. I'll say no more. Heavens, Tom, do you fancy that I'm conceited enough to think that that woman has the least little tender feeling for me still? Oh, I'm tired to death, I mean to go to sleep."

He went asleep, and so did Tom.

But, for the next week, Tom kept his eyes open, and the result of his observation was to make him wish that he had not so easily yielded to his drowsiness and the sophistry of his friend on the first night of their arrival. He perceived that the disaster which he had dreaded was inevitable, unless he could drag Archie away from the house where the woman whom he had once loved, and whom, consequently, he loved still, was living with a husband who was devoted to her. A hundred signs every day showed him that she still loved the man to whom she had been engaged in England before she had proved herself to be an obedient daughter by accepting the offer made to her by Hugh Brown, who had grown rich in Australia. Archie and she were together all day, on horse-back, on foot, sitting on the verandah, singing their old songs; and the worst of the matter was that the good-natured Hugh, so far from having the least suspicion that they were bound together by the strongest tie that the past could weave around

them, was quite delighted to find his wife "enjoying herself"—those were his words—with her visitor. He said so to Tom one day, remarking that it was rarely she found among all the people who visited them a congenial soul such as Archie undoubtedly was, or one who could sing with her the duets she loved. "How well their voices go together!" he added.

Tom could not but admit this; he felt that their voices went so very well together, he would make another appeal to Archie. He did so the same night, and he got a rebuff for his pains such as he had rarely received from his friend. Archie, he felt, was becoming a changed man.

The next day was Christmas Eve, a truly Australian Christmas Eve, with the warm sunshine bathing the broad pasture-lands. For the first time since their arrival at Taragonda Creek, the two visitors were left alone, for their host rode off at daybreak to an outlying part of the station, and his wife was summoned immediately after breakfast to the side of the wife of one of the shepherds, who had met with a bad accident and required nursing.

Before starting on her errand of charity, she spoke a few words to Archie in a low voice, and though Tom could not hear what the words were, he perceived the effect that they produced upon his friend. He groaned inwardly, and walked away among the loquat grove, leaving Archie

to help her to mount her horse. He did not return to the homestead until he had walked over a good many miles of ground, and had made up his mind that he would no longer be a passive spectator of the tragedy which was being enacted on this solitary sheep station. If he could not induce Archie Moreton to leave Taragonda Creek, he himself would leave it without delay, let his host think whatever he might on the subject.

On returning to the homestead, he found that his friend had not returned for lunch. He had, one of the servants said, left a message that he was going down the gully with the overseer, to find if there was still water in the waterhole at the foot of the valley.

It was not until the evening had come that a sudden terrible suspicion took hold upon Tom Burton. He sprang from his seat on the verandah and hurried out to the stables. He got his horse saddled, and galloped off in the direction of the gully.

What a sigh of relief he gave when, after half an hour's riding, he met Archie and the overseer on horseback ! The latter, on their meeting, turned into another track, having to give some directions to the driver of one of the waggons ; and thus the two friends were left to return to the homestead together.

"Tom, old fellow," said Archie, when the

overseer had disappeared in the darkness, "I had no business to speak to you as I did last night. I was worse than rude, and I want to apologise."

"Don't mention it," said Tom. "Haven't we been together long enough to understand one another? You thought me a meddling fool; and perhaps, too, I was one."

"No, no; you spoke like a man," cried Archie, "only—well, we had better not reopen a subject that is not closed. I want you to think the best you can of me, whatever happens, Tom. Sometimes Fate is too much for a fellow. What fatality was it brought us here? No, don't speak—nothing comes of speaking."

"All right," said Tom. "I'll hold my tongue, you may be certain. whatever happens—*whatever happens.*"

They rode on in silence, and in about half an hour reached the largest of the sleeping sheds, where the sheep-shearers were housed. Outside the shed the scene was a picturesque on this night. Fires had been lighted on the ground for cooking purposes, and around them, but at a considerable distance from the centre—for the night was warm—the station-hands were sitting in groups. Some were sprawling at full length on the ground, with their hands clasped at the back of their heads, and others were sitting on logs, with their pipes between their teeth. The flame

of the fires and the glow of the pipes showed the sun-browned features of the men, and now and again shone through the hair of their heads, and on the muscles of their arms, over which the sleeves of their shirts were tucked. .

• The two strangers reined up their horses, and watched the scene for long in silence. Then, suddenly, from among the trees beyond the wool shed, there came the sound of young voices singing a Christmas carol—the most familiar of all those carols which have sounded through England every Yuletide for hundreds of years. Tom saw Archie start at the first notes, and then he remembered that Hugh had told him that his wife had trained in part-singing all the young people on the station. He watched the effect of that curious old strain upon the various men in the groups around the fires—he saw how the pipes were allowed to go out, and how some heads were bowed as the sweet, boyish trebles sung of the Babe that was born in Bethlehem; and then he looked at the man who was seated on the horse beside his own.

“ You sang it when you were a boy, Archie,” he said, in a low tone. “ It was your mother who taught it to you. Only last year you joined in with your sisters, when they sang it in the Vicarage parlour. Will you be able to join your voice to their pure voices next year? Will you—*whatever happens?* ”

Then the old refrain came from those singers in the distance, above whom the Southern Cross was shining in the heavens.

"For God's sake, tell me what I am to do?" said Archie, hoarsely. "Tell me how I can save myself—myself—and her."

"There is only one way, Archie, old chap. Wheel your horse and ride for your life to the railway-station—it is only thirteen miles away, and your horse will do it easily. Leave me to make the excuses. Go, man, go, and save your soul, and hers."

"I will—Tom, I will."

Their hands met; and the next instant Archie Moreton was galloping away on the track to the railway-station.

* * * *


The story that Tom invented to account for his sudden departure was transparently feeble; but it was implicitly believed by Hugh Brown, who was a common-place, straightforward man himself, and believed all other men to be the same.

He little knew how easily men like Tom Burton can weave a tissue of falsehoods—yes, when two souls are at stake.

But Lottie knew.

A LEAD OVER.

A LEAD OVER.

“ H, my dear Chris, I have heard all that sort of thing long ago. Every fellow of your sanguine temperament fancies that the discovery of love is due to his cleverness alone, and he looks and speaks with the enthusiasm of a nineteenth-century Columbus—ah, your name is Christopher—I had quite forgotten that fact. Then there are two of that name ; the first discovered a new continent, the second—that’s you—a new emotion. But there were heroes before Agamemnon, there were——”

“Cynics before Cyril Fowler, though I doubt if any one of the race was as great a pretender as Cyril Fowler. Ah, I have always held that a cynic is a man who is ready to pronounce an opinion upon the universe through having seen

the distorted reflection of his own back garden on a well-polished dish-cover."

"It is fellows like you who force upon fellows like—no, not like me—such experience of the world as makes cynicism inevitable. Never mind. When am I to have the privilege of being brought face to face with—with—well, let us say with the precipice? In all cases of falling in love, the woman represents the precipice."

"When? Upon my word, I'm not sure that I'd be justified in bringing you face to face with her at all—especially after the scoffing way you have been treating the whole subject. A precipice you called her. How would you like to be called a precipice yourself?"

"I shouldn't mind. I've been called worse than that in my time. I was called an hypotenuse in court the other day. Sir Peter called me that, saying that I went straight from one corner of the case to the other. He considered that he had scored off me, and, as usual, he was so pleased at having made a verbal score he gave no further attention to the case, and we won hands down. When am I to be blest by a glimpse at your—what did you say her name is?"

"Precipice—the word was an unlucky one; it suggests a rock, and a rock suggests something obdurate. I hope that Mildred will not be obdurate."

"Oh, no; she'll not be obdurate. A young,

handsome, and distinguished doctor, with an excellent position already made for him! Oh, no, she'll not be obdurate, I think. When am I to see her, Chris? I'm dying with anxiety to see her. I'll only be here for a couple of months."

"She is coming to us for tennis to-morrow evening. If you drop in between four and seven you'll have your anxiety relieved; and if you don't find her the most——"

"Spare yourself those phrases which are trembling on your lips, my friend. I can supply them myself from memory. You see, I've heard them so often before."

"Not from me."

"My dear Chris, I have heard them from you, but through the lips of another man; all lovers are practically alike. They're like iron door knockers that have been cast in the same mould. Yes, I'll be delighted to trot round to your lawn to-morrow. Give my kindest regards to the doctor, and your mother, and Gwen."

"Of course you'll stay to supper afterwards."

"I'm not so sure about the supper, thanks. You see, I've somehow got out of suppers."

"I suppose so. Well, call it dinner and you'll eat it with an appetite. The Londoners' dinner is the country folks' supper."

They parted, Cyril Fowler, the rising London barrister, strolling on to the house of his mother,

and Chris Lifford, the only son of Dr. Lifford, the physician of Glastonhurst, going on to prescribe for the mumps of one of the village children. The children of Glastonhurst rarely rose higher in the medical scale than to achieve the mumps—modified mumps, that did not harm anyone, and did but little good to the doctor. If there had not been some very wealthy families in the neighbourhood—families who could afford to have some of the higher scale complaints—without such complaints they would have nothing to talk about when they met—Dr. Lifford would never have been able to get together so comfortable a fortune as that with which he was, on the best evidence, accredited; nor would he have allowed his son Chris to adopt the profession of medicine. He would, however, have had a considerable amount of difficulty in persuading his son to adopt any other profession. Chris was a born doctor. He had had a most distinguished course both at the university and at the hospitals—so distinguished that his father agreed with the people who said he would be a fool to bury himself in such a place as Glastonhurst. It so happened, however, that Chris Lifford had in the course of his work stumbled across something in the way of a discovery—great discoverers and inventors invariably stumble across something when they are looking for quite another thing—and as only time could prove whether his find

was worth anything or nothing, he thought that he could not do better than pass a year or two helping his father in his practice at Glastonhurst.

He had just completed his first year of this probationary treatment of himself when he had been brought face to face with a young lady named Mildred Cross. She was a visitor at the Rectory, and the rector's family and the doctor's were on the most intimate terms of friendship. Chris had just made up his mind that he was in love with Miss Cross, and that it was quite impossible for him ever to be in love with anyone else inhabiting the world at that moment, when Cyril Fowler appeared at the village. The Long Vacation had just begun, and he meant to spend the first month of it, as usual, with his mother, in her modest house, which was known as Avon Lodge. He meant to have a little trout fishing before joining some friends of his in Switzerland. Cyril and Chris had gone to Winchester together. Both were ambitious, and each had attained a considerable measure of distinction in his own profession. The space of seven years is sometimes long enough to enable even a barrister to prove whether he is going to be a success in life or a failure. The space of time was, at any rate, quite long enough to cause persons who were capable of judging, and whose judgments were worth something, to refer to Cyril as a rising man. He had plenty of work in the

courts, and it was understood that he had made his mark. By the aid of a very effective vein of cynicism he had made quite a reputation as a speaker ; and it was known that he was aiming at a seat in Parliament. He would, it was generally understood, be condescending enough to accept a seat in the Lower Chamber until his appointment as Lord Chancellor made his removal to the Upper imperative.

On the whole, the good folk of Glastonhurst were prouder of him than they were of the rising young doctor. They regarded the law and all that appertained to it with something akin to awe ; but they had no such respect for medicine. They were a very healthy community.

When Chris returned home after visiting the "case"—a case of simple mumps—he told his sister Gwendolen not only that he had met Cyril Fowler, but also that he had asked him to their tennis party, which was to take place the next day. He was surprised at the way Gwendolen said :—

"Oh ! You asked him ?"

"Why shouldn't I ask him ?" he said. "You surely don't shrink from meeting him, Gwen ?"

"What ! I shrink from meeting Cyril ?" cried the girl. "Nonsense ! Why should I do that ? If every girl shrank from meeting the man to whom she chanced at one time of her life

to be engaged, there would be a great deal of unnecessary friction in this world of ours. Oh, no ; I'll be glad to see him for myself ; but——

“ But what ? ”

“ Oh, nothing. Only, isn't Agnes Birrell bringing her friend, Miss Cross, with her ? ”

“ And what has that circumstance got to say to Cyril's coming here as well ? Aren't there tea-cups enough to go round ? ”

“ It isn't of the tea-cups I was thinking.”

“ Oh, the saucers, maybe ? ”

“ Go on, and maybe you'll hit upon the right thing.”

“ Oh ! Plates—spoons——”

“ Ah ! ”

Chris burst out laughing.

“ I see what's in your mind,” he said, at last. “ You're afraid that Cyril may——”

“ My dear Chris, you know why it was that I came to the conclusion that Cyril and I could never be happy together.”

“ Of course ; you told me all that there was to be told. You said that he was too easily carried away by new faces and figures of girls. Yes, you said he was quite as deeply in love with Isobel Parke as he was with you, and after that with some other girl. He really only wanted to cut out Charlie Grover, who was, he thought, thinking about Isobel.”

“ That's all,” said Gwen. “ Very well ; I'm

sure I'll be delighted to see him' to-morrow. You haven't changed your mind about Miss Cross ? ”

“ This is not a case of mind, my dear Gwen : it's a case of *heart*. No ; I'm not likely to change.”

Gwendolen Lifford smiled as her brother walked away. He had opened his heart to her some days before regarding Mildred Cross, telling her that he felt confident that he had found the one girl who was calculated to make him happy—that is how men refer to such a matter ; they are glad to find the girl who will make them happy, but most women are glad because they hope to make the man happy. Now, Gwen had seen a good deal more of Miss Cross than Chris had done, and she had her doubts regarding the capacity of that young lady to make her brother or any other man happy. She had no difficulty in perceiving that Mildred was encouraging the attentions of Chris, but at the same time she did not so carefully avoid the attentions of Algie Farbrook, the son of the Squire, as to cause Gwen to be convinced that Mildred was in love with Chris. She had an uneasy suspicion that Mildred Cross was simply doing her best to make her visit to the Rectory as agreeable as possible to herself. She had a feeling that Mildred was likely to think more of herself than of anyone else in considering the problem of how best to

have what is termed in some quarters a "real good time." Gwen was, however, too clever a girl to give the smallest hint to her brother of what her woman's instinct told her in regard to Mildred, for she knew that, as a rule, brothers treat with the loftiest scorn their sisters' views on the subject of other young women. And as Gwen herself was to be married before the end of the year—she had broken off her engagement with Cyril Fowler eighteen months before—she was anxious to remain on good terms with Chris until the time came for them to part.

The tennis-party on the next evening was a very simple function, consequently a very delightful one. Mildred Cross was, beyond the possibility of a doubt, a very charming and accomplished young woman. She played tennis with that grace which invariably accompanies a highly-developed skill, and when she was resting she made herself extremely agreeable, first to Chris Lifford by asking him all he knew about a certain bacillus, and, later on, to Cyril by asking him all he knew about the distinguished Law Officer who drew the clever caricatures. Then, after a pleasant little supper, she sat down to the piano, requiring, as all nice girls do, only the smallest amount of persuasion. She sang a very lovely song, and sang it with the greatest possible expression. The first stanza, which contained the lines :

This—this is the love of which I sing—
This—This is the love that to you I bring,

she addressed—but only with the most delicate and scarcely perceptible movement of her large violet eyes—to Chris, and he was rendered almost deliriously happy thereby.

The second stanza, which began :

Oh, why art thou silent, why art thou mute,
When the night is a thrill with the joy of the lute ?

she addressed with equal subtlety to Cyril, but as Chris had his head bowed in a rapture of listening to the voice that he loved, he was not rendered unhappy by noticing, as he might have done, that the sweet singer had given a little shy glance towards Cyril.

But Cyril noticed everything. He was a lawyer.

It was an ideal night for lovers. The loveliness of autumn's gold was over the land, and the moonlight was mingling its silver with the wealth of the woodland. Chris made up his mind to ask her to marry him. He would walk with her to the Rectory, and if Cyril came at the same time he would, of course, keep well behind, or well before—Chris did not mind which—with Miss Birrell, the rector's daughter. There was a high bank above the river path, and it was crowned with beeches. They would pass among these trees, and here he would take her hand and tell her—Well, some portion, at least, of the

programme which he had so neatly arranged was carried out. The little party passed among the beeches in the moonlight ; only it so happened that it was Cyril who walked with Miss Cross, and Chris who followed with the rector's daughter.

They separated quite pleasantly at the Rectory gate ; but after that there was some interchange of words between the two men as they walked away together.

" Was there ever such an ass as you are ? " cried Chris to his friend.

" Ass ? Why ass ? " said Cyril, with great self-possession.

" Why, man, couldn't you see what I was aiming at when I insisted on walking to the Rectory ? "

" You said you wanted a breath of fresh air before going to bed."

" Oh, I thought that you would have tact enough to perceive that I meant to put my fate to the touch. Just think of it ; it might have been all over by now if you had had the sense to walk ahead with Agnes Birrell."

" Oh, it might have been over. How would you be feeling, do you fancy ? "

" Either the happiest man on earth or the most wretched."

" Of course, but which would it have been, do you think ? "

"She gave me a meaning look when she came to those lines of her song :

This—this is the love of which I sing—

This—this is the love that to you I bring.

I could scarcely doubt from her look that she understood me."

Cyril Fowler, thinking of the look which had been thrown to himself, smiled, but said nothing.

"But what do you think of her?" asked Chris, suddenly. "Didn't you find her all that I had said?"

"She is undoubtedly an excellent type of—well, of that sort of girl," replied Cyril.

"Oh—nothing beyond that?"

"Well, you see I wasn't within a yard or two of putting my fate to the touch. How well she sings!"

"Doesn't she? I heard her for the first time in church, a fortnight ago. I think she sings sacred things much better than those songs."

"Which are, however, not exactly profane. Well, here we part. Good-night, old chap. Oh, yes, I don't think your taste is at fault."

Thus they parted.

"He said he didn't think my taste at fault," Chris explained to his sister the next morning, when they had a chance of talking together.

She smiled. He wondered what she meant by that smile of hers.

Perhaps he had some idea of it when, that same afternoon, on paying a visit to the Rectory, he found Cyril Fowler strolling through the garden by the side of Mildred Cross, while Miss Birrell was plucking something off a line of bushes—it was not too late for gooseberries—at some distance. Cyril was in a particularly good humour, and so, apparently, was his companion. They were laughing together quite pleasantly, and when Chris came up the young lady repeated to him the clever paradox which, she said, Mr. Fowler had perpetrated, and inquired if he did not think it was quite too bad for a clever lawyer like Mr. Fowler to come to puzzle simple country-folk with his involved phrases.

Well, although Chris had a very definite opinion on this particular subject, he said nothing. He was not quite so merry as Cyril for the rest of the afternoon.

“I fancied that I understood something of Cyril’s character,” remarked Gwen, when, after some little fencing on the part of her brother, she succeeded in hearing from him the reason for the gloomy view which he was disposed to take of such abstractions as Friendship and Love. “Yes ; Cyril Fowler does not care a scrap about any girl until he finds that some other man cares about her. Then he thinks it incumbent on him to try and cut the other man out. His ruling

passion is neither love nor friendship, but only vanity. Why should that girl encourage him?"

"Does she?" asked Chris.

"Of course she does. She has a touch of his quality also."

"I won't hear a word said against her. She is the best and——"

"You still fancy that you love her?"

"Fancy? There's no fancy in the matter. If she doesn't give me some hope I'll—yes, I'll apply for an appointment on the West Coast of Africa."

"You had better put yourself out of pain at once. Go up to the Rectory to-morrow—early in the day—and have an interview with the girl."

He followed his sister's advice. He was at the Rectory shortly after midday, but he found that he might as well have remained at home, or have attended to his uninteresting patient with the mumps. Miss Birrell and her visitor had gone out on the river with Mr. Fowler, the maid-servant told him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Gwen. "I'll write to Jessie Felton to come here for a week or to."

Chris stared at her.

"What difference would Jessie Felton make?" he asked.

"She'll make all the difference in the world,

if I understand anything of the character of Cyril Fowler—and I think I do. You want to draw him away from Mildred Cross. Well, give him a lead over in another direction, and he'll follow you."

"A lead over."

"Quite so. Can't you see that, as usual, he has only been making himself attractive to Mildred because he knows that you love her? He doesn't know what love means. His vanity is his ruling passion—that is why he is certain to get on well at the bar. He is stimulated to win a case, not because he believes that his client is in the right, but simply in order to cut out a clever opponent. He made up his mind to cut you out in the case of Mildred Cross; but if you show him that you are willing to be cut out, and that you much prefer the society of Jessie——"

"He will try to cut me out with Jessie? What a plot! What a clever girl you are, Gwen! Only—I say, what about Jessie? It's scarcely fair to her, is it? Oh, hang it all, Gwen, I couldn't play such a part towards any girl, to say nothing of a girl whom I like so well as Jessie. I do like her, you know."

"I know you do, but I want you only to behave towards her as you would towards any girl whom you like so much. If then Cyril cuts you out—why, perhaps Jessie may not object

to marry a rising young barrister should she be asked to do so."

"You are a clever girl, and no mistake!" said Chris, after a long and thoughtful pause.

And so she was. She was, in fact, a great deal cleverer than her brother fancied. Jessie Felton was her dearest friend. It had been her hope for some years that Jessie would become Chris's dearest friend also, but in the days when Jessie had been staying with her Chris was stupid enough, she thought, to be so devoted to the study of his profession as to have no eyes for anything more beautiful than a bacillus. He had, of course, shown that he liked Miss Felton; but that was all. She was greatly disappointed, and she had no difficulty in perceiving that Jessie was also greatly disappointed. But what can a girl do if she finds that a bacillus occupies her place in a man's heart, which she would accept if he would ask her?

Before Jessie Felton has passed a night under the same roof with him Chris Lifford found himself wondering how it was that he had failed to see upon the occasion of her previous visit, more than a year before, how beautiful and charming a girl she was. Why, if one came to comparing the actual beauty of the two girls it was certain that Mildred would be pronounced second to Jessie.

"But it so happens that I am in love with

Mildred, not with her beauty," he said to himself, as he got into bed that night.

He found, to his amazement, that it did not cost him so much self-denial as he had expected it would to refrain from visiting the Rectory during the next week. He was also amazed to find how many ideas—how many aspirations—he and Jessie had in common, from bacilli to butterflies. He felt that if he had not been in love with Mildred he might have—but what was the use of discussing such profitless contingencies? He was in love with Mildred, and that was the end of the matter.

Of course, Cyril fell into the trap that was laid for him by the adroit Gwendolen. No sooner had he played his first game of tennis since Jessie's arrival at the doctor's house than his attentions to Miss Cross—so very pronounced before—showed a falling off. He fancied that he perceived a look in Chris's eyes, every time they were turned in the direction of Jessie, that was easy of interpretation to the astute cross-examiner of uncertain witnesses. The result was that he paid almost a daily visit to the doctor's house, and did his best to interest the doctor's guest. He had accepted Chris's lead over; and yet, curiously enough, Chris was far from satisfied. On the contrary, he was intensely annoyed, and he showed himself to be so when Gwen suggested to him one day, at the end of a fortnight,

that he would have a capital chance at the Rectory now that Cyril was so plainly attracted to Jessie.

"Confound your cleverness!" said he. "Why could you not let things run their course? What was the use of interfering in the hope of putting everything right? Oh, in matters of this sort all cleverness is a mistake."

"Good gracious!" cried Gwen. "I thought that you——"

"Tell me this," said he, interrupting her almost fiercely. "Does she care about that fellow?"

"Does who care—Mildred?"

"Mildred? Mildred? As if I cared—you know I don't mean Mildred, but Jessie—Jessie. Does she care for Cyril in the least?"

"How can I tell? If you want to know you'd better ask herself."

"Herself? How could I ask herself?"

"The best way for a man to ask a girl if she cares about any man is to ask her if she cares about himself," whispered Gwen, with laughter in her eyes. Before he could say another word to her she had run away.

He stood there lost in thought for some time. Then he saw Mildred Cross pass the window. She was about to pay a visit to his mother.

With a strange laugh he went out by the French window upon the lawn, and thence to the

road by the side gate, and on to the village. The mumps were still rampant.

But, with all her cleverness, Gwendolen Lifford was wrong in fancying that Cyril Fowler was not the man to fall in love with such a girl as Jessie Felton. He may have been attracted to her originally through motives of vanity, but during the fortnight that had elapsed since meeting her he had come to the conclusion that he had never loved a girl before. He was in earnest now ; and that was why, on overtaking her alone on the road at dusk that evening, he held her hand some moments longer than he need have done, and looking into her frank eyes, said :

"Miss Felton, I have been anxious to find you alone for some days past. You will listen to me now, when I tell you that I love you. Jessie, will you be my wife?"

"I cannot," she said, "I cannot make you any answer."

"You cannot? Why not?" he cried.

Those frank eyes of hers looked straight into his—his eyes were not quite so frank—as she said—

"Because I have loved Chris Lifford for a year, and this afternoon I promised to marry him at the end of October."

He turned from her without a word. His vanity had received a great shock. He had not gone far before he met Mildred Cross. His

heart leaped up. After all, he was not crushed. Mildred Cross was a far more attractive girl than the other ; she was an heiress, he had just heard that day ; and her singing——

He spoke to her. She was hurrying to the Liffords', she said. She wanted to congratulate Miss Felton.

Then he spoke to her again.

She lifted up her head and laughed.

"How can you be so absurd, Mr. Fowler?" she cried. "I thought that everyone knew I was engaged to Sir Geoffrey Wace. We are to be married in October."

Cyril Fowler started for Switzerland the next day.

The month of October came in due course.

THE DUKE.

THE DUKE.



THERE never was a man less prone to jealousy than Jack Haysing, late of Taragonda Creek, New South Wales, and now of 1, Battenberg Gardens, Mayfair, and Holmehurst, Surrey. No man was more convinced of this than Jack Haysing ; consequently when one day he received at his club a letter signed "One Who Knows Women," he was somewhat puzzled by his sensations. At first he had, as a matter of course, laughed on glancing at the signature of the letter. On reading the letter he had (equally as a matter of course) laughed again, only not quite so heartily—so frankly—as before. Then he had frowned and flushed, and, finally, with many exclamations of contempt, he tore the letter and envelope and

flung the fragments into one of the waste-paper baskets of the writing-room.

But then it was that he became conscious of certain curious sensations which he found impossible to analyse at a moment's notice. So far as he could make out, the desire to kill some one was his dominant impulse at that moment. He glanced round the room, as if anxious to see if there was anyone present whom he might kill with prudence and without a loss of self-respect. The occupants of the room were a very unsuitable lot for such a purpose, he felt. There was not one among them who would be pronounced by an expert a killable man. He was disheartened by his scrutiny of them. Then he delivered a few more exclamations of contempt and pressed the button of the nearest bell. What a humiliating reflection it was that, with all our boasted civilisation and artistic progress, it was still impossible for a man who had an urgent need of another for slaughtering purposes to give his order to a waiter with any hope of its being carried out with reasonable promptness !

He could only order a brandy and soda.

And he did.

Then he put his hat firmly down upon his head, and left the room. He had scarcely closed the door before one of the pages put another envelope into his hand.

"When did this come ? Is the person who

brought it in the hall?" asked Jack, hurrying out.

"It came a few minutes ago, sir—delivered by a district messenger," replied the lad.

This information was repeated by the hall porter; and Jack Haysing left the club and tore open the envelope in the Piccadilly porch.

"She did it again yesterday evening."

Those were the words which were written on the sheet of paper, and in the same handwriting as the letter which he had received ten minutes before—those were the words which now went fluttering in small fragment under the feet of the omnibus horses.

"No, I'm not the jealous one—the jealous one is the writer of those infernal lies—some woman, I'll swear. Oh, yes; the woman's touch was in every line—every word—every letter. But why—why? What's her motive? Motive? What does it matter about a motive where such a creature is concerned? The thing that would write an anonymous letter practically accusing of the foulest crime the purest woman that ever lived, would not be scrupulous in the matter of an adequate motive. But she has failed—miserably failed. I'm not the jealous one."

So his reflections rushed along; but ever behind them that first letter which he had received above the signature "One Who Knows Women," remained as a sort of permanent back-

ground against which all his reflections were outlined.

These were the words of that letter :—

“SIR,—I pity you, that is why I feel it necessary to write to tell you that you have a rival in your wife’s affections. She sees him frequently. When she pretends to be driving out to shop, it is in reality in order to see him. Yesterday they met among the trees at Kensington Gardens, and I swear to you that he put his arms around her neck and kissed her, not once, but twenty times, and she made no resistance. You have lived all your life in the backwoods of Australia and come to England to marry the first pretty girl you see. She accepted you because she loved you, not because you are said to be worth sixty thousand a year and a sheep run the size of Scotland. You are perfectly certain of that.

“I pity you.

“Do you fancy that the woman with a past exists only on the stage?

“He is a peer of the realm, and she loved him before she ever saw your simple, honest face.

“This comes from

“ONE WHO KNOWS WOMEN.”

It was after tearing up this letter that he had longed for that relief in which in the heart of a healthy man takes the form of a slaughter of a fellow-creature. The sensation found an ex-

cellent exponent in the man who cried out,

"Blood, Iago! blood! blood!"

And then he began assuring himself that he was in no way jealous. Neither that letter nor the much briefer one which he had received when at the point of leaving the club had had any effect upon him, he endeavoured to assure himself. But still that desire to kill a fellow-man remained with him, even after he had passed through the portals of his house at Battenberg Gardens.

The letter was undoubtedly written by some one who had become acquainted with at least the outline of his life since coming to England six months before. He was an Australian, the son of one of the wealthiest colonists, and he had been thoroughly happy so long as he had remained in active work on the largest of his sheep stations in New South Wales. Then he had come to England and had become as interesting a personage in English society as a handsome man of thirty, with an income of fifty or sixty thousand pounds a year, and a considerable amount of property in a part of the world where land is still worth something, is likely to be, if his manners are moderately good. Within the first three months of his arrival he had married the sweetest girl that the world held (he felt). Her name was Marjorie Churchward, and her father, though a peer, was not wholly destitute

of means. He would have married her, he swore, even if she had been the daughter of a duke, which showed that he was really and truly in love with the young woman. And when she agreed to marry him, he declared that he was the luckiest fellow in the world.

But what Society said was that she was the luckiest girl in the world, and then began making guesses at his income, as if to justify their statement, which, as a matter of fact, they meant to.

Some people said that she was very good-looking, and might have aimed at someone higher—say, an outside broker.

They had got married in April, and the month of July was now half over, and yet, in spite of a very trying season, during which they saw a great deal of each other, there seemed to be no falling off in devotion on either side. But then Marjorie had had her sister Kate staying with her since the 1st of June.

It was of this sister Kate that Jack was thinking as he entered the house without having got rid of that curious sensation which had come to him on reading those two letters. The Honourable Katherine Churchward had a fine talent for badinage, and she had taken care not to keep it a profound secret while she was under the same roof as her sister and brother-in-law. She called them daily the married lovers, and said

equally cutting things about their behaviour at every opportunity. Only the previous day, as Jack now remembered, she had declared that she felt sad when she reflected that she would live to see Jack or Marjorie as distrustful to each other as the other married persons (specified) upon whose course of conduct the conversation had turned.

• He remembered also how heartily he had laughed at that ridiculous idea. He had laughed in his old style—a style which seemed quite appropriate to his surroundings on the largest sheep station in the largest island in the world, but which had the effect of startling policemen and omnibus horses when manifested in Piccadilly. Would he ever laugh in that way again, he asked himself as he entered his house and went upstairs to his wife's boudoir—the dainty room which she had furnished after her own heart with the most exquisite articles of furniture that had ever been bought by an English dealer at the dissolution of a French palace. He felt certain that his wife would be in this room, resting before her tea was brought to her ; and he meant to tell her what was the nature of the letters which he had just received, and perhaps she might be able to suggest by whose jealous hand they had been written. But when he entered the room he found that it was empty. She had, however, been at the Marie Antoinette

writing desk quite recently, for the desk was open, and on it was lying a half-written letter, and the pen that had been thrown on the blotter was still slightly wet.

He perceived this as he strolled round to close the window, for the draught which had blown off one of the little silken candle-shades was about to blow off a second. In the pause that he made for an instant at the writing table, with one hand on the frame of the window, a gust of wind came and not only made a parachute of the candle-shade, but whisked away the half-written letter as well.

He quickly closed the window and then picked up first the candle-shade and then the letter. In doing so he could not avoid seeing the last sentence that his wife had written. It was fragmentary, the beginning of it evidently being on the first page, but he saw before him these words :—

“My feelings when he came beside me where I was resting in a secluded part of the gardens, and, glancing around to see that we were not observed, put his arm about my neck, and drawing my head down to his, kissed me on the lips not once but——”

That was all that his wife had written before laying down her pen—the writing was, he knew, Marjorie’s—and leaving the room, he replaced the paper, wondering as he did so how it was

that his hand did not tremble. He felt that the light had gone out from his life, and yet his hand was not trembling.

She was back in the room in a moment.

"What! you have returned? Surely it can't be six o'clock yet? You said you wouldn't be back until six. Great heavens! Jack, how pale you are! Something must have happened!"

She had hurried towards him (and he was pale now, even though his hand had not trembled before), and stood looking up to his face anxiously after she had spoken.

He looked down at her and kept his eyes fixed upon her face for several moments as though he fancied he could read her secret on her face. He actually had an idea that a man by much looking may now and again read a woman's secret in her face.

"What could have happened?" he said quietly. "Things don't happen in Battenberg Gardens at the same rate that they do at Taragonda Creek. There are no wool sheds in this locality to be set on fire by sundowners."

"But why are you so pale. Jack?"

"Oh, everyone is pale in this enervating place; white is the fashionable complexion of the innocent as well as the guilty. Don't you feel inclined to leave all this wretched contest of petty interests known as 'the season' behind

you and get aboard the yacht at Southampton for a six months' cruise?"

She burst out laughing. Did ever guilty woman laugh so innocently before, he asked himself. He was even idiotic enough to fancy that guilty women could not laugh the laugh of innocence.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" she cried. "Is Jack also among the cynics?"

"Cynics? Who could live in London without being a cynic?"

"You, for one. You are no more cynical than an engine-driver. A man who goes along at the rate that you and an engine-driver—not on the Underground—attain, could not possibly be a cynic. Now be a good boy and go away and play, and mind you don't break your toys."

Then the man entered with a salver bearing a tiny Sèvres *tête-à-tête* service, and a silver muffin-dish with hot cakes, greatly beloved by Mrs. Haysing.

Jack left the room the moment he had seen her turn to her writing-table and hastily slip her half-finished letter into one of the drawers, which she carefully locked.

"No tea for me, thank you," he said, in reply to her cordial invitation—she had actually the courage to issue her invitation while she was locking the drawer upon that letter—but though

he should dearly have liked to be gruff with her, he could not be gruff in the presence of a servant. He could not even bang the door of the room to which he descended—they called it the study because Lord Churchward retired there to sleep off his dinner when he chanced to be staying with his daughter and his son-in-law—for the sides of the doorway were lined with india-rubber.

He did not follow the example of his illustrious father-in-law on entering the room. So far from sleeping, he felt feverishly active, and though he threw himself down in a chair at once, he did not remain seated for more than an instant: he sprang to his feet and continued pacing the room for half an hour.

“If I had not seen that letter—that accursed letter—all might have been well,” he cried as he threw himself down once again on the chair, and struck his clenched hands against one of the leathern arms, for the room was furnished not artistically but comfortably. “If I had not seen her letter!”

It did not occur to him that he was paraphrasing the words of the man who had cried:—

“I found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips.”

He could not admit that he had been stirred to any measure of passion through merely receiving the two letters at his club. He had, at any rate, not been more annoyed than the

average man is on receiving an anonymous letter containing suggestions to the discredit of one dear to him ; and he had felt that he could tell Marjorie the substance of both letters and leave it to her own good judgment to suggest the name of the malicious writer and the object—he assumed that the writer was a woman—in penning so shocking a libel. But that little puff of wind that had blown the fatal letter into his very hand. . . .

What could he do except stare at the empty hearth, his hands clutching the leathern arms of the chair ? He felt that his hearth was indeed empty. His life was wrecked.

Once again he was on his feet pacing the room.

“ I was a fool, oh, such a fool ! ” he muttered. “ What business had I to leave Australia and to marry the daughter of a peer, and set up as a man of fashion in this miserably false town ? I was born and bred in the bush, and I belong to the bush, not to Mayfair. And yet—and yet . . . great heaven ! what is in my mind ? She—she—my beloved—my Marjorie . . . oh, is it possible. If she is not everything that is good and pure and true, there is no woman living who is true. Oh, that letter—that letter ! ”

He heard the sound of horses at the hall door, and he knew that Kate Churchward had returned from her afternoon's ride in the Row. In

another moment that young lady had entered the room which he was pacing.

"Good gracious ! who would have thought of meeting you here ?" she cried. "What on earth are you doing in the study ?"

"I suppose I may be permitted to enter a room in my own house now and again," said he with a fine ironical air.

"What ? Now where did you pick up that socialistic theory ?" she asked. "Its flat socialism—communism—almost anarchy ! Your own house indeed ! Haven't you a wife and a sister-in-law ? What's the matter with you ? You look as—black as—well, as Othello."

"There's nothing the matter beyond the two ills you've just mentioned."

"Two ills ?"

"Yes : a wife and a sister-in-law. Tell Margorie that I've promised a man to dine with him at his club."

"Why can't you tell her yourself ? I've to search out a quotation in *Madame Chrysanthème*—Pierre Loti's are this corner—for Lord Crosbie."

"Oh, confound all your lords," muttered Jack Haysing, as he flung himself out of the room, and a minute afterwards out of the house, leaving Kate standing startled in front of a bookcase.

"Heavens !" she murmured. "Heavens ! already !"

Some minutes had passed before she set about her search among Pierre Loti's books, which occupied an honourable position on a lower shelf of one of the bookcases, for *Madame Chrysanthème*. A quarter of an hour had passed before she had found the quotation which her friend Lord Crosbie was anxious to obtain verbatim.

When Marjorie received from her sister the message with which Jack had entrusted her, she opened her eyes very wide.

"What can be the meaning of this?" she asked. "It is quite unlike Jack to go off in that fashion."

"How do you know what is like Jack or what is unlike Jack? You've only known him about five months. Surely it takes a bit longer than that to know a full-grown man," said Kate.

"I think I know Jack," said Marjorie.

"'Tis the wife who speaks," said her sister. "And I shouldn't wonder if Jack fancied he knew you, though he doesn't even know himself. Did you hear how he laughed at lunch yesterday, when I merely suggested the possibility of his being jealous of you?"

"Well?"

"Well? Well now, he has just left the house, looking as black as Othello. Dearest Marchy, I hope you haven't given that excellent man cause for uneasiness."

"Oh, go away—go away. I have a letter to finish before dinner."

Before Kate had written out her quotation, Marjorie had finished that letter of which her husband had caught a terrible glimpse half an hour before. The conclusion of that letter was not of such a type as would tend, if seen by her husband, to make him feel that he had been a fool. It referred to additional kisses and caresses and endearing words which the writer had received from the person originally alluded to in the sentence which had been read by her husband. When she had brought her confession to a close and had sealed the letter, she rested her chin upon her hand and seemed lost in her own reflections for a long time. They could not have been pleasing reflections, for she sighed more than once, and when she rose from her chair she found it necessary to wipe her eyes.

Jack Haysing did not put in an appearance at any of the three receptions to which his wife and her sister were driven that night, and on their return home about three o'clock in the morning they learned that he had gone to his bedroom early.

He went to his wife after breakfast, and, without the slightest preliminary, suggested to her that they should cut short their stay in town by three weeks, and start on a cruise in his yacht—

"for Norway first, and the West Indies afterwards," he said.

"I don't think I should like that at all," she replied after some moments' hesitation—suspicious hesitation, he thought.

"You have got some reasons of your own for wishing to remain in town, no doubt," said he, pointedly.

She hesitated again before saying in a low—a suspiciously low voice, he thought:

"Yes, I have some reasons of my own, apart from the natural desire to give Kate as much enjoyment as possible. She would be greatly disappointed if we were to curtail our season by three weeks. What has caused you to have that strange whim, Jack?"

"I have reasons of my own for it," said he, with a very amateur sneer, he had never before had occasion to sneer, and the art is not acquired all at once. "If you have your own reasons for wishing to remain among all this rack and rabble, why may I not have my own reasons for wishing to leave them behind me?"

"My dearest Jack, don't take the thing so seriously," she said.

"Great heavens! you want me not to take the loss of all—all—all, too seriously!" he cried.

"All? What on earth can you mean, Jack?"

"I mean what I have said. Oh, there is no

use talking any further on this matter or any other. I thought I would give you a chance to escape before it is too late, that's all."

"Escape?—escape? Oh, from the latter weeks of the season?"

He looked at her for a few moments, and then left the room without another word.

At the hall door he came face to face with Kate. He drew her into the study and pointed to a chair.

"What's the meaning of this, pray?" she inquired. "You are as bad as papa. That's just his attitude when he wishes to lecture me about something—millinery, perhaps—a bill. If a brother-in-law is to be as bad as a father to a poor girl——"

"Kate," he said gravely, "I want to put a few questions to you—questions of vital importance to me—to my happiness—to our happiness. I will ask you to be perfectly truthful in your replies."

"Oh, no, no! things cannot be so bad as that," she replied. "Perfectly truthful! Oh, heavens! is it come to that?"

"I want to know if Marjorie loved anyone before she met me?"

"Oh, Jack! what a question! I won't answer it."

"You'll not leave this room until you do

answer it," said he, catching her almost fiercely by one of her wrists.

"You hurt me!" she said. "You are worse than my own father."

"Answer me."

"Answer you. Of course Marjorie loved some one—she loved me—papa—old nurse."

"Did she love any stranger—some one who bore a title?"

"Ask herself."

"I ask you, and you shall answer me."

"I never knew such cruelty. I'll go away to-morrow. You are worse than papa ever was in his goutiest days."

"Answer me."

"Oh, Jack, don't be a fool."

"Answer me. She loved some one."

"I think she did. But——"

"He is in town now?"

"He may be. How can I——"

"And she loves him still?"

Kate was silent.

"She does love him, and you know it," said he in a whisper. "She loves him, and she meets him. Deny it if you can."

"Marjorie is quite good, Jack."

"Oh, good—good! What is his name?"

"His name?"

"You know it, and you shall tell me."

"Promise me that you will not make a scene."

"I promise you. Why should I make a scene?"

"Oh, I know men."

"His name."

"His name is the Duke of Ennerdale. Now, for heaven's sake, Jack, don't try to fix a quarrel upon him, and, above all things, don't breathe a word of my having told this to you."

"Don't be afraid," said he. He had let go her wrist, almost flinging away her hand, and now he spoke with his back turned to her as he gazed out of the window.

"I hope I haven't made mischief," said she plaintively. "Don't take the matter so seriously, Jack; I give you my word, Marjorie means nothing wrong."

"And I gave her a chance of escape, and she deliberately refused to avail herself of it."

"Escape—a chance of escape?" said Kate eagerly.

"Yes, I offered to take her for a cruise in the yacht at once—cutting off the remaining weeks of the season—"

"Good gracious! I hope she refused."

He turned and looked at her.

"And she is your sister," he said reproachfully.

"Yes; and I am her sister into the bargain.

If she had accepted your ridiculous offer, pray who would look after me ? ”

“ The morality of Mayfair ! You would not sacrifice a fortnight’s frivolity to save your sister from the bottomless pit ! Oh, go away—go away. ”

Kate looked quite frightened. She did not obey him ; on the contrary, she went to him.

“ Dear Jack,” she said, laying a hand upon his shoulder caressingly. “ Dear Jack, I have always liked you, and I mean to be your friend in this business. Marjorie, I happen to know, has appointed to meet him again to-morrow. ”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, it occurred to me that if we happened to be at the place of meeting—you and I, you know—an explanation might be forthcoming. ”

“ An explanation ? ”

“ Well, perhaps I should have said an arrangement. You could see the Duke, you know, and if you wish it particularly, give him to understand that you object strongly—very strongly—to his meeting Marjorie again, and then—oh, surely everything unpleasant can be smoothed over by mutual explanations. ”

“ Was there ever such callousness ? Mutual explanations ! Oh, this miserable Mayfair ! ”

“ Don’t be unreasonable. Can’t you see that I wish to be your friend ? ”

"I see that you don't wish your season to be spoilt."

"Yes, that's it. But you mustn't blame Marjorie."

"Do you know that she permitted him to throw his arms around her neck and to kiss her—not once, but a dozen times!"

• He had sprung from his chair once more, and was facing her with flashing eyes.

"I heard something about that," she replied. "But you must remember, Jack, she was fond of him before she ever saw you."

"That's a sufficiently valid excuse. Go away. I'll think over your suggestion and let you know to-morrow what conclusion I come to."

"Oh, yes, you'll come with me, Jack, and I'm certain that everything will be explained away satisfactorily."

"Including the kisses?"

"Well—yes; after all, kisses only mean——"

"Thank you; if I want to study the catechism of Belgravia I'll know to whom to apply for instruction. Meantime——"

"Oh, yes, I'll go."

And she went.

He could not remain in the house any longer. He felt stifled in the atmosphere that pervaded it. He was seized with a great yearning to breathe once again the sweet air blown over a thousand miles of billowy pasturages in the

centre of which his Australian home was situated. As he got into Piccadilly and was carried along in the swirl of the traffic westward, he felt towards London as Jonah may have felt towards Nineveh. He felt that it was merely a matter of days—forty or thereabouts—when this city of iniquity should be overthrown for all its wickedness. He felt a yearning to leave it behind him and shake off its dust from his feet. Why had he ever been so great a fool as to come to such a place when he might have lived breathing the pure air of the boundless pasturages of the land where he was born? What a fool he had been! He had frequently heard how hollow was fashionable society in London—how utterly regardless of the elementary principles of morality was the British aristocracy—particularly the titled branches; and yet he had been so great a fool as to fancy that the daughter of a peer—one of the most beautiful women in society as well—had loved him and accepted him for himself alone—him—a man who had spent several years of his life superintending the shearing of sheep and the driving of cattle!

He fancied that he was a fool for thinking that it was possible for a young woman who had all her life been accustomed to fashionable society to love himself alone a man with sinews like whipcord and muscles like bags of nails; a fact which shows how little he knew of the young women

of fashionable society—the young women who have all their lives been subjected to the privations incidental to existence among the titled classes.

As he pursued his way westward, he became more deeply impressed than ever with his simplicity. He had allowed himself to be fooled. She had been, no doubt, urged on by her parents to marry him because of his sixty thousand a year. He had read in many books popular in the Australian bush of such things happening. In fact, the incident had formed the basis of both books and plays with which he had been acquainted, and yet he had not been warned. He had not read aright the excellent lessons taught by these productions; and the consequence of his neglect in this matter was that he was now striding aimlessly along the road, putting as much space as possible between himself and the sweet wife whom he had married only a few months before.

Suddenly he stopped.

Why should he remain any longer in the midst of this false society? Who would hinder him if he made up his mind to return to Australia? Why should he stand any longer between those two people who loved each other—Marjorie and—what was his name?—the Duke of Ennerdale?

He continued his walk, asking himself these

questions ; but though he prolonged his walk to Hammersmith and continued his consideration of the questions all the time that he was driving back in a hansom, he had failed to find a legitimate answer. Of course no one could hinder him from returning to Taragonda Creek, when it might please him to move in that direction, and equally of course there was no reason why he should stand between two people who loved each other. But what advantage his disappearance to Taragonda Creek would be to the persons of whom he was thinking, most people would have difficulty in perceiving.

He saw Kate Churchward that night, and merely said to her :

“At what hour to-morrow?”

“Twelve o’clock. She is going out to drive at eleven. We shall remain in the house and leave together shortly afterwards,” said Kate.

He went to his room, and Kate went off in the brougham with her sister to a small dance and two large ones.

Then it was that Marjorie confided in her her fears that Jack was suffering from some strange malady that made him morose. She wondered if Kate had ever heard of such a disease incidental to the Australian bush, and if it would be wise to call in a specialist.

The next day Jack watched his wife drive away in the victoria shortly after eleven o’clock,

and she had scarcely departed before Kate was by his side already in a walking costume.

"Come along," she said gravely. "We need not order another machine, we shall walk."

They left the house together.

"Oh, heavens! that it should have come to this!" he cried, as they turned the corner of Battenberg Gardens.

"Oh, terrible! terrible!" said Kate, with the sigh of a professional moralist. "Isn't it enough to make the most hopeful girl as cynical as a novelist must pretend to be if he wishes to be successful! Still, I don't despair. Oh, surely you and he—the Duke, I mean—can come to some understanding."

"I was thinking if it would not be better for me to get back to Australia at once," said he. "If I thought that their happiness would be secured—"

"But it wouldn't," she cried quickly. "How would their happiness be secured by your clearing off to Australia?"

"Oh, the whole thing has been a miserable failure, and heaven only knows why I am going with you now."

"I've always been a believer in the effect of a quiet talk, without any high feeling or anger on either side. I'm confident that you'll like the Duke of Ennerdale, and that's half the battle."

"Half the battle! The fellow that didn't scruple to kiss my wife!"

"And how often didn't you kiss her yourself? Oh, Jack, you shouldn't allow yourself to be carried away by this insane jealousy."

"Oh, don't talk to me of jealousy."

She didn't. The words that they exchanged until they had passed Knightsbridge were few. They walked on until they reached Kensington Gardens, about a quarter to twelve o'clock. On entering the Gardens, Kate turned aside by one of the subsidiary walks that wind among the trees to the most secluded part, where a seat was to be found. The nursemaids find no joy in seclusion: they do not depart in any sense from the broad way.

"This is the seat where she usually waits for him," said Kate tranquilly.

He groaned. He was well aware that the place was chosen with judgment. The leaves of a chestnut drooped almost over the seat. It was a seat for lovers.

"No, I don't think she'll keep him waiting for long. She never does."

They seated themselves. Jack Haysing's head bent forward as he listlessly scraped the earth between his feet. He looked up, hearing Kate give a musical call of "Algy, Algy!"

She explained it to him.

"That is a little boy I know. I want to speak to him."

"Are we not better without him?" asked Jack.

"Oh, no ; he's a dear little chap."

A handsome boy of perhaps six years of age was running across the sward towards her, followed by a nurse—a superior sort of nurse.

"And how have you been all this time, Algy?" she asked, as he stood before her and eyed Jack suspiciously.

"First-rate," said the boy. "I'm in words of four letters now. H-o-o, horse. H-o-m-e, home. William calls it 'ome. but that would be h-o-m, you know. I've got a pig that grunts like anything—it cost four-and-six—and a boat with sails, only it's at the bottom of the sea, you know—the sea that's over there where William takes me to ride before breakfast."

"Oh, the Serpentine," said Kate.

"Yes, that's the sea," said he.

Jack watched the boy for a few minutes, and the boy eyed him.

"What's your name?" said the boy at last.

"Jack Haysing. What's yours?"

The child stood up at attention and drew a long breath.

"My name's Reginald Seymour Dudley Colchester Carlingford Fitzurse, Duke of Ennerdale," he said solemnly.

The stick dropped from Jack Haysing's fingers, and the boy picked it up.

"Yes, this is the Duke of Ennerdale," said Kate quietly. "He is Marjorie's godson. His poor mother, who died last year, only two months after her husband, was Marjorie's dearest friend. She meets him here every now and again, and writes an account of him to his aunt, Lady Warsham. Here comes Marjorie herself to meet her beloved."

The boy raced off to meet Marjorie and sprang into her arms, nearly overturning her.

"Kate," said Jack after a pause, "you wrote those letters to the club. You made a pretty fool of me."

"I made you jealous ; that's all the same."


"I'm so glad we've met Marjorie," said Jack coolly, as his wife came up. "I want you to come and see how you like an arrangement in diamonds that Hoffmann has got."

"It has been on Jack's mind for the past two days, Larchy," said Kate. "Oh, yes ; he has talked about nothing else to me. He was afraid you mightn't like the arrangement of the stones. And he has promised me that lovely swallow in brilliants, and I mean to get it."

And she did get it.

HIGHWAYMNAN FOR
AN HOUR.

HIGHWAYMAN FOR AN HOUR.

“LD PORCUPINE is bound to be sold with the rest of the live stock,” said Farmer Grant firmly to his niece Polly. Polly was a very pretty young woman, and on this account her uncle, who was a bachelor, but a man who had read a good deal, considered it to be his duty to speak firmly to her. Curiously enough it was for precisely the same reason that the remaining person in the farm parlour—his name was Tom Loveday, and he was also a bachelor—considered it an outrage to utter a word in her presence, except in the softest tones.

“But old Porcupine was never regarded by my poor father as merely live stock,” said Polly. “Isn’t that the truth, Tom? You know the

merits of this case. You know that father never would consent to sell Porcupine."

"I can swear to it, sir—yes, even in a court of law," cried Tom eagerly.

"There!" said Polly, with a wave of her pretty hand—it was brown with hard work, and it is surprising how many brown hands are pretty. "There, now, uncle; Tom knows all about it. There's nothing more to be said on the matter."

Farmer Grant smiled grimly as he looked first at his niece then at the young man, who, he had a shrewd suspicion—he had read a good deal—would have had no objection in the world to bear out any statement that might be made by Miss Polly. He felt that there was greater need than ever to be firm. He had read of foolish and fond old uncles—yes, and young uncles as well—being wheedled by pretty nieces—yes, and nieces who were not pretty, until the path of duty was forsaken for a certain primrose path leading to disaster. He felt that it would never do for him to be as such men. He had never yet (he fondly believed) been wheedled, and he had no intention of beginning now that he had passed his sixtieth year. He would be firm.

"I'm much indebted to Mr. Loveday for the interest he takes in our business," he said. "I cannot doubt, sir, that your interest is—well, wholly disinterested," he added, turning to Tom.

"That's just where you make the mistake, sir," said Tom, with a flush. He wondered if there was precedent for a young man's ingratiating himself in the eyes of the nearest relation of the young woman whom he aspires to marry, by breaking the head of such a relation. He rather thought that the aggregate of the opinion of society on this delicate point was opposed to such a view.

"Hold your tongue, Tom, you big goose," said Polly, who was clever as well as pretty, and understood the whole art of wheedling as understood in the latter years of the eighteenth century—as understood, for that matter, in the latter years of the nineteenth—nay, as understood in the Garden of Eden. "Hold your tongue, Tom; can't you see that all my uncle wants is to do his duty? I know very well what you mean, uncle; you want to do what's best for me."

"You've a head on your shoulders," said her uncle, emphasising the "you" somewhat invidiously, Polly thought; somewhat irritatingly, Tom thought. "Yes, my dear niece, you know perfectly well, I am happy to think, that I'm only anxious to do my duty by you now that poor father is gone. If the will hadn't stated clearly that all the live-stock was to be sold by public auction——"

"It didn't say expressly all, uncle dear; it

only said simply the live stock. If the word 'all' had been used by papa I would not say anything further. But he never meant old Porcupine to be sold by public auction. Oh, Porcupine would not survive the indignity."

"The will said: 'I desire that the live stock in my farm at Avonhead be sold by public auction'—those are the exact words, and they are capable of one construction only. Farmer Grant was becoming firmer than ever; but Polly did not despair. Her confidence in her own powers of wheedling was great; but on the whole it was not, perhaps, too great; she had had a good deal of experience of the weakness of men even within the circumscribed limits of Avonhead village.

"Ah, well, I'm sure you'll do your best for my interests, uncle dear," said she, laying one of her pretty brown hands upon one of his—his were brown but not pretty—and looking pathetically up to his face.

Tom Loveday scowled, and Polly, observing his scowl, was, of course, proportionately pleased, for there was a good deal of the woman about Polly. That was possibly why so many youths in the neighbourhood of Avonhead had been more or less in love with her since she had been five years old—the age at which it was understood she had begun to attract men.

"I think I'll say 'good even,' Polly," he

murmured, rising from the settee where he had placed himself some half hour before. Farmer Grant had not been in the parlour then. Polly had ; she had also been seated on the settee. But ~~that~~ article of furniture was large and capacious : it was capable of accommodating at least seven persons, and would have permitted also of their sitting much further apart than Tom and Polly had been seated—previous to the entrance of Farmer Grant.

“Must you really go?” said Polly, still patting quite pleasantly the hand of her uncle. (He did not look just so firm now as he had appeared a few minutes before.)

“I said that I merely dropped in, being your nearest neighbour, to see if there was any way I could be of help to you,” said Tom.

“You were always good-hearted, Tom,” said she. “I thank you for your kind intentions, but, you see, now that my dear uncle is with me——”

“You’ve no further need for me?” cried Tom, with a flash of indignation that caused Farmer Grant to smile.

“Well, you see, an uncle is—well, so much nearer, Tom, than I——oh, good-even to you.”

She gave him her hand quite carelessly ; but the way she squeezed the hand which he offered her gave him a start. He stood before her with open mouth for a second or two until she cast

him a significant look. He gave a little awkward laugh, stammered a good-bye to the farmer, and got into the road.

"What did she meant?" he asked himself as he hurried homeward, and it took him quite half an hour to satisfy himself that the girl he loved had been playing a part.

"Belst if she bean't wheedling her uncle!" he muttered; "wheedling the old man! She thinks to wheedle the horse out of him, does she? She'll not do that. No, she has mistaken her man this time. But, Lord! didn't she do it well? I'm blest if I wouldn't rather be made a fool of by her than have my hand squeezed by the Squire's daughter with her glove on."

Polly Grant's father had been dead only a few weeks, and her uncle, the sole executor of the will, had come to Avonhead from his own great farm in the North to see that his late brother's intentions regarding the disposal of his property were carried out. The farm was to go to Polly on her marriage day, provided that she married a man who, in the opinion of her uncle, was capable of carrying it on as it had been carried on during the two hundred years that it had been in the possession of the Grant family. Meantime, as the girl was not engaged to marry anyone, the will directed the greater part of the land to lie fallow, and the live stock to be sold by auction.

Now Farmer Grant was one of those persons who, if a disagreeable course is optional, never hesitates to adopt it in preference to an agreeable one. His late brother's riding horse, Porcupine by name, was a fine animal, and had carried him to the local hunt for several years, and to include him among the live stock of the farm seemed to many persons to be putting a too literal construction upon the clause in the will. As is already known, Polly held a very strong opinion on this point. She declared that it could never have been her father's intention to include Porcupine among the farm cattle that were to be auctioned, and she begged her uncle to withdraw him from the sale. Farmer Grant, however, showed himself impervious to her pleading, and her wheedling—a fact that proved Tom Loveday to be a better judge of character than his sweetheart—and the good horse was accordingly advertised with the live stock to be disposed of on the last day of the sale.

Polly wept through a couple of days, for she loved the horse more dearly than any living thing—Tom Loveday, perhaps, excepted—but her tears had no effect upon her uncle beyond confirming him in his belief that he was doing his duty. Persons of his temperament seem to fancy that any course which entails unhappiness to others must certainly be the right course for them to adopt. Mr. Grant not only refused to

withdraw the horse from the sale, but sternly declined to buy him in for his niece.

"There's no word about buying in any of the live stock, niece," said he.

It was at this point that Polly's patience gave way. She addressed him for some five minutes in a tone that was certainly not susceptible of being interpreted as a phase of the young lady's wheedling.

For three days the sale at Avonhead Farm went on, and on the fourth the various lots of Short-horns, Berkshires, and Southdowns were brought to the hammer; and all fetched good prices, for farming was usually a paying business in the year 1795, and for good stock a good price was paid without demur. It was Christmas Eve, but the day was so mild that people were saying, as people say nowadays, that no winters were like the old winters. Poor Polly spent the greater part of the day in the stable with her arms about Porcupine's neck; and it was in this attitude she was found about noon by Tom Loveday.

"Cheer up, my lass," said Tom.

She looked at him reproachfully.

"If you have nothing better to say to me than that you might as well have kept away," she cried. "Tom, that uncle of mine is a beast!"

"And so he should be auctioned with the live stock, you would suggest?" laughed Tom. His

laugh sounded very unfeeling, and she was not the young woman to tell him so.

"I don't mean to be unfeeling, and that's why I tell you to cheer up, Polly. Things may not be so sad as they seem at the first blush."

"Things couldn't be worse," she said. "My uncle's a beast, and yet I'm forced to live with him for the rest of my life."

"And Porcupine's no beast and yet you're forced to part from him for ever in an hour."

"You're an unfeeling brute, Tom, and I'll never speak to you again. I'd sooner part from you than from Porcupine—dear old Porcupine!"

"That's as should be. I couldn't love any girl that didn't love her father's horse better than she loves me—oh, I'm no fool, Polly. I know what girls are—that is, some girls, and there's no need for you to spend a single year of your life with your uncle unless you particularly wish it."

"You know nothing about girls, or you wouldn't talk that way to one who is within an hour of saying good-bye for ever to the horse that her dead father was so proud of, Tom."

"I know enough of girls to make me sure that there is nothing they like so well as a man who means business. I mean business, Polly, I've come here on a business errand, not a love errand. I'm going to buy the horse."

"Oh, Tom!"

It was not Porcupine's neck that her arms were about now ; it was Tom's neck.

"It's a fact," said Tom, when he had kissed her once, or perhaps twice. He could scarcely avoid kissing her, her face being so close to his own.

"But where will you get the money ; Porcupine will fetch fifty pounds ?" she inquired, and she unloosed her arms until a satisfactory explanation should be forthcoming.

"I got it from father last night," replied Tom. "Father thinks a deal of you, Polly, and when I told him about the horse he said that if fifty guineas would buy old Porky for you, he'd lay the money down with a light heart. He's the right sort, is my father, though maybe a bit close."

Polly had heard now and again that Mr. Loveday was inclined to be a trifle close in money matters, but she had no difficulty in perceiving that he had mastered the economic principle embodied in the casting of a sprat in order to land a salmon. In this transaction she felt that he regarded her as the salmon to be landed by his son Tom.

What did that matter, however, if she only got the horse ? So far as she was concerned, she had been "landed," so to speak, by Tom long ago.

"Your father's a darling, Tom," she cried.

"But do you mean to buy Porcupine and hand him over to me?"

"Nothing else, my love," he said. He did not think it necessary to tell her that his father had suggested that the horse should remain in his, Mr. Loveday's, stable, until Mr. Tom Loveday had married Polly, and that it had taken him, Tom, a good half hour persuading his father that such a stipulation would be a most ungracious one.

"Tom," cried the girl, the tears on her cheeks, "I'll give your father a kiss the first time I see him, and every time he asks me afterwards. There, now!"

That was a very satisfactory conclusion to come to; but the result of the sale of the horse was not quite so satisfactory to the lovers. They had known that the "lot" which comprised Porcupine would be eagerly competed for; but they had not anticipated the introduction of an element that entered into the transaction, that element being the jealousy of a certain well-to-do miller named Hopgood, whose offer of marriage had, some few months before, been refused by Polly Grant. Jonah Hopgood had bought some of the farm stock, and he was present when the horse was put up for sale. To the surprise of everyone, the moment that Tom made a bid for the animal, Jonah entered into the competition.

The horse was started at twenty guineas by a large farmer in the neighbourhood, and this was followed by a bid of twenty-five by a retired officer, who wanted a fair hunter. Guinea by guinea the bids advanced to thirty-two, and then it was that Tom offered thirty-five, feeling pretty sure that the horse would become his property at this price. No one saw the gleam in the miller's eyes so soon as he perceived, which he did in a moment, that his rival in the affections of Polly Grant meant to secure the animal, to which it was generally understood the girl was deeply attached.

"Thirty-eight guineas," said the miller, and everyone in the farmyard turned to look at him in surprise. What could he want with such a horse, they inquired of one another. There were a few more present, however, who were able to account for the motives which induced Jonah Hopgood to endeavour to outbid young Loveday. The auctioneer smirked, he perceived the likelihood of his commission being considerably increased by the introduction of this new element of rivalry into the business.

"You know a horse when you see one, miller," said he, with a wink, to which, however, the miller did not respond. "Thirty-eight guineas to your bid, sir. Now then, Mr. Loveday, you're a gentleman of spirit; what's your reply?"

Some moments had elapsed before Tom cried out :

"Forty."

"Forty-five," said the miller.

"Fifty," said Tom, and there was a cheer from the crowd in the farmyard, for young Loveday was popular, and it was understood that he was the favoured suitor. Jonah Hopgood's bid of fifty-five guineas was heard above the sound of the applause.

Tom clenched his hands and looked as if he would have liked to have a quiet five minutes alone with the miller. He had already bid beyond the sum his father had authorised him to pay for the horse, and he knew that if he were not able to lay down the money after the sale, the horse would be put up again, and perhaps knocked down for a trifle. Glancing across the yard, however, he saw Polly standing pale and excited. She gave him a look that caused him to cry out :

"Sixty guineas !"

"Going at sixty——"

"Five," said the miller quietly.

"Five—sixty-five guineas, and dirt cheap at that, too, gentlemen," said the auctioneer. "Now then, Mr. Loveday, will you see yourself beaten?"

"Seventy," responded Tom in a low voice.

"Five," came the mechanical bid of Jonah Hopgood.

There was a long pause, broken only by the stale pleasantries of the auctioneer. Tom hung his head, but his hands were more tightly clenched than ever. He knew that he had lost the horse, but he determined to make his rival pay dearly for it. First, in yellow guineas, and, later on, with a cracked head. He replied to the miller's challenge three times, and then, fearful lest the horse should be knocked down to him, in which case there would be a fresh sale, when Hopgood would probably get it for thirty guineas, he dropped out of the contest, and the miller pulled out a bag of guineas, and counted out one hundred and five for the horse.

"Healthy rivalry, gentlemen, is the soul of trade," said the auctioneer. "Calculate my commission, and add it to Miller Hopgood's account," he murmured to his clerk.

"You're a man, Tom Loveday!" cried Parson Woolstone, shaking hands with the crest-fallen young man. "you're a man, sir: and I'll marry you without fee or reward some of these days, and, mark my words, all of you; no good will come of a purchase made on a basis of ill-will and jealousy."

"Hear, hear, parson," cried the crowd.

To the surprise of most persons who were present, Polly Grant went to the side not of the disappointed Tom, but of the impassive Jonah. She gave him her hand quite pleasantly, saying:

"I'm so glad that poor old Porcupine will have a good master. I know you'll treat him well; Mr. Hopgood."

"Ay, you may be certain of that, Miss Polly," said the miller. "Let them that knows more than us talk about the ill-will of the transaction."

"And you'll be sure to come into the house for supper," said she.

The miller's eyes glistened. He perceived that the girl was anxious to keep on good terms with him.

"You're kind and I'll not fail you," said he.

Tom's eyes were gleaming with some measure of fierceness as he watched Polly smiling in the man's face as she turned away. Then she made a sign to him, and instead of leaving the farm as he at first intended, he followed her indoors.

The house was not empty; there was plenty of eating and drinking going on in the kitchen; but it was not to the kitchen, but to the parlour the two young people went.

"The hound!" cried Tom, flinging himself down on a chair. "The hound! but wait until I have a chance, and you'll hear of his head being broken. And yet you shook hands with him and smiled upon him!"

"Why should I not? He may make me a gift of Porcupine before night," she said.

"If I thought that—and you asked him to partake of supper."

"He deserves some refreshment."

"Oh, refreshment. He'll need some refreshment before I've done with him."

"If you injure him I'll, never let my hand rest in yours, Tom. Let us forget all this sad business, and talk about something else—that oak chest, for example. You never saw it before."

"What on earth have all the oak chests in the world——"

"I'm only talking about this one just now. It stood for I don't know how many years in my poor father's room, and I found many queer things in it. I'll show you them all."

"Heavens, do you think I'm in a mood——"

"Look here." She had opened the chest. "Here's a wig of the reign of Queen Anne. Isn't it funny? Would you care to have it? And here's a buff coat and boots that an ancestor of mine wore in the Parliamentary wars. If that pike wasn't at Sedgemoor it was somewhere else. But this is the greatest curiosity; it is labelled:

"Ye stocke-in-trayde of Wild Wilder, ye noted highwayman, shotte on Avon Heath by Guy Grant, circ. 1751."

She held up a rather large bundle. He took it from her, and mechanically unbound it.

"Wild Wilder; I've heard my father speak of him," said Tom. "He was a great rascal. I wish we had a few more men like your grand-

father, Guy Grant, nowadays. There are too many highwaymen about. Only last week, Sir Charles Bilton was robbed on the Heath—you heard of it?"

"Oh, yes. Highway robbery is a great crime unless when absolutely necessary."

"Absolutely necessary? Do you mean—"

"Look at your bundle. There's Wild Wilder's crape mask. Would it fit you. Why it might be made for you. And his leathern holster. Would your mare kick up her heels if it was on your saddle?"

"But this—what is this?" cried Tom holding up a curious cloth—a brown ground with large white spots. "Did Wild Wilder use this as a garment?"

"Not he, but his horse wore that," said the girl. "He used it as a disguise for his horse. My father told me all that he had heard from his father about the highwayman. He escaped hanging more than once when captured, owing to his victims asserting that they had been attacked by a man riding a bay horse marked with white spots, whereas his own horse was a dark brown without a white hair. Now, I'll make you a present of the whole stock-in-trade."

"What can you possibly mean, Polly?"

"Mean? Why to show that I love you, Tom, and I hope that you'll show that you love me."

"My darling, you know that——"

"I know that Jonah Hopgood will probably remain here till nine o'clock, and that his road takes him across the Heath. I do hope that he will be quite sober, for as you said just now, solitary riders have been stopped and robbed there within the past few weeks. Now, good-bye, Tom, and don't feel chagrined because the miller got the best of you at the auction."

She held out the bundle to him, but he did not take it. He only shook his head.

"I don't understand you, my lass," said he. "You can't surely be serious in hinting to me—oh, no, no, that would be impossible."

"Oh, go away—go away," she cried impatiently, flinging the bundle down on a chair.

"Would you have me——"

But at this point there were the sounds of feet outside the room door, and she pushed him out by the door leading to the square hall, and pointed to the open hall door, while he was in the act of asking her again what she meant.

He asked himself that question more than once in the course of the evening, when he told his father the story of the auction of the horse, and had been soundly abused by him for not outbidding his rival.

"Didn't you know that your father would stand by you whatever you might bid, you rascal?" shouted Mr. Loveday, senior.

But this is just what his son was sure his

father would not do ; but he said nothing, but sat in the chimney-corner smoking. and asking himself what Polly meant.

About ten o'clock he went to bed, and an hour afterwards there was a great clamour at the door of the farm. Mr. Loveday, sen. demanded to be informed as to the cause of the outcry.

"We be the Christmas bellringers—there's eight of us, farmer," a man shouted up to him.

"You're drunk to a man, you rascals ; this isn't the church, on the contrary it's Woodbeck Farm," declared the farmer.

"That's so ; but we came upon Miller Hopgood half dead, and not very drunk either for Christmas Eve, and he was attacked by a highwayman and robbed of Farmer Grant's horse, old Porky ; and he has a sort of cut on his head and wants looking to," was the reply shouted from below.

"Ah, the rascal ! didn't the parson say that no good would come to him ? I'll be down in a minute, when I get in my small clothes. Tom—Son Tom ! Lord, what a sleeper the boy is ! Tom, I say !"

"Well, father, what's the matter ?" came the voice of Tom from the door of his room.

"Open the door, lad ; the parson's words have come true for a wonder," cried the farmer.

Tom ran to the door and removed the bars,

but before the door had been opened his father was by his side.

There was quite a crowd of men outside, one of them holding a lantern in his hand.

"Go within, miller," said someone encouragingly.

"What's the matter, Mr. Hopgood?" asked Tom.

"I'm hurt, sir—head cracked—horse stolen—a big highwayman, sir—one of the largest size—and pistols—two—five—six," muttered Jonah, entering the kitchen.

"And the horse—Porcupine?" shouted Tom.

"Carried off, sir—clean off."

"What, you allowed Farmer Grant's honest horse to become a highwayman's mount? And the rascal has got off? Give me my boots, men."

"What are you going to do, lad?" asked his father.

"I'm going to save an honest horse from a career of crime, sir," shouted Tom, pulling on his second boot and unslinging the holster with the horse pistols that hung beside the gun over the mantelshef.

"Take the mare, and mind you be the first to fire, lad," said his father.

Tom was soon astride his mare and galloping along the track that led to the heath. He hoped to intercept the highwayman, who would, he

believed, make for the road to Brackenhurst, whence he would travel into the next county. Before he had galloped a mile along the heath the newly risen moon—it, was in its last quarter—revealed a figure on horseback going briskly along. At the sound of the galloping behind him the figure seemed to clap spurs to his horse, which he wheeled. Then began a chase across the heath, both riders going at a gallop, and clearing everything in their way. The mare was a swift one, and Tom was a light-weight, but Porcupine was the better stayer. Tom knew this, and urged his mount onwards all he could.

He got within easy pistol shot of the highwayman, but he was afraid to fire lest he should shoot the horse. He believed that he would be brought alongside Porcupine before the mare should give way, and in a short time he had the satisfaction of perceiving that he was gaining upon the horse ahead of him. If he could only keep the mare at the same pace for a few minutes longer, he would be alongside Porcupine, and then——

Well, just as he asked himself if he should use his pistol butt or the horn handle of his riding-crop, Porcupine's rider turned suddenly in the saddle and fired in his direction. It was a chance shot, for the light of the moon was insufficient to allow of any aim being taken ; but the

bullet took effect. Tom felt the sting as of a wasp on his shoulder, but still he continued his wild career, until just as he had drawn level with the horse he was pursuing, its rider had disappeared! Well, so much the better, he thought; he would be saved a fight with the highwayman, who had clearly slipped off the saddle. He gave his mare the spur, and in a few minutes the two animals were tearing along neck to neck. With a last effort Tom managed to hook the horn of his crop in Porcupine's bridle; but still the race continued, and Tom wondered how it was that he had not strength to pull up both animals.

His vain endeavour to do so was the last thing he remembered before he opened his eyes and heard a cry of joy from Polly Grant, who was bending over him as he lay in bed, in his own room, in the broad daylight.

"Thank God! Thank God!" cried Polly, "he is not dead; on the contrary he is alive."

"I told you it was a mere scratch, girl," said Farmer Loveday; "still a bullet's a bullet."

"And the horse—Porcupine?" murmured Tom.

"The horse is all right, Tom. You brought it up bravely," said Polly "You were found with your arms about the mare's neck, but you had not let go Porcupine's bridle."

"And the highwayman—has he been found?" asked Tom.

"Not he, the rascal must have got off clear, and there's not much chance of clapping eyes on him now that David Hayling, the constable, is looking for him," laughed the farmer. "Now, no more questions, lad. You lost some blood, and you are still weak. We must have you whole for the New year."

Thanks to the careful nursing of Polly he was able to sit up in the farm kitchen when the bells were rung at the birth of the year 1796.

"Don't they sound like wedding bells?" said Tom.

"That they do; but we'll have them ringing a real wedding chime before the year's out, won't we, Polly?" cried the farmer, kissing her. He then went discreetly out of the room, thinking that perhaps Tom might put the same question to her in the same way.

He was not mistaken.

But then it was that Polly burst into tears, and declared, with her head upon Tom's shoulder—the one that was not wounded—that she was a wicked girl.

"What? for nursing me back to life?" said Tom.

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" she cried. "You'll never forgive me, I know, but I must confess all to you. It was I who shot you."

He laughed.

"You shot me, did you?"

"Yes, dear, When you wouldn't take the highwayman's stock-in-trade, I put it on myself and waited for Jonah Hopgood on the heath; for I was determined to get back Porcupine—oh, I was such a fool!"

"And you knocked him off the horse and threw the stirrup over the saddle as you used to when you were a slip of a girl? I see it all now. Your cloak flowed back so that I couldn't see how you were riding. Oh, Polly, what a girl you are!" He roared with laughter, but suddenly became grave. "But you slipped off the saddle—weren't you hurt, dear?"

"Only a little," she said. "I thought you were a highwayman, Tom, and so I walked back to our farm and crept in by my window, without anyone being the wiser. At daybreak a message came that you were killed—shot by the highwayman who had taken Porcupine from Jonah. Then I knew all the truth and I thought I should have died with grief, Tom. Ah, you will forgive me, dear?"

Tom lay back and once again roared with laughter, and then his father re-entered the kitchen, saying again:

"Ay, it's a wedding chime those bells will ring before long. Say 'ay,' my lass, and make us all happy this first hour of the New Year."

And Polly said "Ay," with her hand tenderly clasping Tom's, and the tears still upon her face.

* * * *

It only remains to be said that Miller Hopgood refused to move Porcupine from his old stable. He had always meant to make a gift of the horse to Miss Polly, he said; and thereupon people smiled, saying they remembered what the parson had said at the auction.

So, after all, the chief honour and glory of the business were accruing to the parson, and he accepted his position as a prophet with suitable meekness.

But only Polly and Tom knew who was the highwayman that had flung the miller from his horse

THE END.

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